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CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITIES

Social and Religious Contexts



edited by Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker

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Contemporary Spiritualities

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Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker

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Foreword

This is a remarkably timely book, coming at the moment when spirituality is expanding into new and unfamiliar horizons. After a long slumber, spirituality was awakened in the West by the arrival of spiritual teachers from the East in the 1960s. Ashrams and Zentos appeared on the horizon. Hindu gurus, Buddhist masters and Sufi sheiks began awakening Westerners from a bland secularism. In this climate, the established traditions of the West – Judaism and Christianity – began searching their roots to find their own meditative practices and spiritual wisdom.

Publishing projects emerged such as the Classics of Western Spirituality, now numbering a hundred volumes. The series includes Jewish, Christian, and Islamic spirituality as well as that of indigenous traditions. A companion series, entitled World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, sought to tell the history of spirituality from archaic times through the great religious traditions and into the future. For the first time, a history of spirituality was attempted, on a global scale, to make available the spiritual wisdom of the human race in its historical unfolding.

More recently, a new development has emerged. The term ‘spirituality’ is beginning to appear in contexts where traditionally it has been ignored or banned. In fact, it seems to be encompassing all of life. For example, it is emerging in the world of business, where the classical dynamics of spirituality are being tapped. In June 2000, the Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts, David Scott, a physicist trained at Oxford University, organized a conference entitled ‘Going Public with Spirituality in the Workplace, Higher Education and Business’. We may be in a new phase of the awakening of spirituality that encompasses all of life. In this it is like the spirituality of indigenous people. If this is the case, then there is



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need to assure that it penetrates deep into the human spirit to avoid superficiality.

Contemporary Spiritualities offers a broad spectrum of diversity. It deals not only with the spirituality of individuals, but also with communities. In each case, it explores the whole spectrum of spiritual possibilities. It begins with essays on several individuals who are grounded in classical spiritual traditions. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was trained in the spirituality of Saint Ignatius and ordained as a Jesuit priest. With this as a foundation, he developed a new synthesis of spirituality based on his professional training as a scientist and on his perception of the cosmic Christ as the energizing force of evolution. The chapter on Teilhard de Chardin by Ursula King focuses on his Christ mysticism as an original contribution to spirituality and is the finest essay on this topic which I have seen. In a similar way, Bede Griffiths is grounded in Benedictine monasticism and was engaged in a creative dialogue with Hinduism. Thomas Merton, a Cistercian monk, also dialogued with non-Christians and was passionately committed to justice and peace.

One of the major spiritual personalities and teachers of our time is the Dalai Lama. The essay devoted to him displays the richness of his personality and the attraction of his spiritual teaching. Not only is he a proponent of Buddhist spirituality, he is also a leading figure in inter-religious dialogue. The spiritual profile of the Dalai Lama has such depth and clarity that it could stand alone as a major piece of spiritual reading. Of great importance in contemporary spirituality is the role of feminism. In an essay on Carol Christ, feminist issues are seen in their complexity and in their importance for ongoing dialogue.

Often spirituality is looked upon only as an individual matter as if the spiritual journey were a solitary task. Quite the contrary. It is in community that one makes the spiritual quest. To highlight this, *Contemporary Spirituality* is divided into two parts – one dealing with influential writers and thinkers, and the other with faith communities. Among the communities treated in the book are the Buddhist Forest Retreat Order, the Amish, and Taizé. The section is brought to a close with a chapter entitled 'Street Spirituality: A Narrative Case Study of a Street Community', which reveals the way in which neighbours establish relationships and live out their potential. Throughout the study of communities, the reader is challenged to perceive the connections and the ramifications between the individual and the encompassing community.



The polarity between the individual and the community reveals an underlying methodology of the book as a whole: to acknowledge the variety of perspectives that are implicit in spirituality, especially in the contemporary era. The profiles of the individual spiritual teachers such as Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama reveal their groundedness in ancient traditional wisdom as well as their creative sensitivity to the present situation and its implications for the future. The book is also open to the issues that have arisen in the West with the breakdown of the paradigm of modernity and the emergence of postmodernism without limiting itself to the horizons of postmodernity. It deals with sociological and psychological aspects of spirituality without neglecting the realm of the spiritual. This study does not restrict the reader to a single paradigm for understanding contemporary spirituality, but it underscores the organic diversity of spirituality in the present and in its movement towards the future.

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Introduction

Clive Erricker and Jane Erricker

Arguably, the challenge of the spiritual is the most significant we face in our contemporary world, though it may not be seen as such by many. Dwelling on a justification for this statement, we may cite the following as evidence: it is necessary for every individual to establish a place of belonging in society. This does not mean that he or she belongs within society conceived as a universal whole, but has a place within its subdivisions, however large or small, prominent or marginalized, conforming or dissident. To speak of belonging is to evoke a sense of the spiritual. Given this need for belonging we can expect a division of cultures, of allegiances, according to how individuals and groups establish their sense of solidarity, trust and obligation. This rests as obviously in what will not be acceded to as in what will. To invoke spiritual aspiration as a means of arriving at humanitarian consensus is as likely to result in conflict as it is to ameliorate conflict, because it is so bound up with the particularity of identities: national, religious, social and cultural, and the entwined meaning of these terms. The notion of the spiritual is far too political and contentious to be just an innocuous or private concern; witness recent conflicts in Eritrea and Ethiopia, Serbia, Albania, Croatia and Chechnya to uncover the significance of such a statement. Spirituality does not lie in some nether region of transcendental deliverance but must be grappled with in the politics of this world. All the studies included point to this in different ways.

This volume is divided into two complementary but quite different parts: influential writers and thinkers, and contemporary communities. This requires some justification. In the planning of this work, we became aware that most studies divide themselves into two distinct areas that concern themselves with either the former or the latter. The difference of approach is quite marked. The former tend



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to be biographical studies with an accent on theological contextualization. The latter tend to be socio-anthropological studies with an accent on sociological relevance. Since we wished to address the question of contemporary spirituality – that is the relevance of the spiritual to constructs of contemporary society – we found ourselves between and betwixt two different approaches that did not necessarily converge. As a result, we have attempted to bridge a gap in these approaches by bringing together two types of study that find their common link in the idea of addressing the spiritual. This hybrid approach can be justified only on the merit of marking out a territory of relevance and concern to modern society and academic study. The study of the spiritual is not just concerned with unique individuals, nor is it absent from or marginal within the motivations and characteristics of communities within wider societies and cultures. We cannot claim to have adequately crossed the divides of different academic disciplines but, hopefully, we have put down a marker for the need for spiritual understandings to be placed centrally in any discussion of religious, theological, social and cultural debate. The implications of this become evident in the text, but we raise some particular issues below.

Individual and community identities are located in tensions between belonging and difference, historically, culturally and religiously. At times this difference can become so acute as to represent an understanding of existence that makes accommodation within accepted traditional understandings problematic. In the studies on influential writers and thinkers, we find these tensions created and addressed in different ways. Each of the studies included relates the spiritual understandings of the individual to the issues faced in their lives. For Teilhard de Chardin, Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton they were bound up with Christian theological commitment encountering Indian and Asian spiritualities. There was also the tension between the contemplative and institutional orthodoxy that can be traced back to other contemplatives in the Christian Church's history. Other factors that also emerge relate, in Teilhard de Chardin's case, to his fascination with science, and in Merton's to his political pronouncements. With Krishnamurti, we are presented with his rejection of his native Brahminism, his adoption by the Theosophical Society and, eventually, his rejection of the intellectual presuppositions of Western society. The Dalai Lama still wrestles with China's political ambition and an attempt to



create a common ethical purpose across religious divides. In Carol Christ we find a rejection of theology in favour of a theology that will empower the feminine. These voices speak on pervasive contemporary issues still unresolved.

In the studies of contemporary communities we again find the tensions between belonging and difference marked out in different ways. The communities studied all have a Western presence, but this is linked, in historical and contemporary ways, to their presence elsewhere. When we trace the reasons for the presence of these communities in Western locations, we are presented with patterns within increasing globalization. We have sought to mark out these patterns in these studies. For example, the presence of the Amish in North America as a Protestant group derived from the Anabaptists, the COGIC as a presence emerging from the trade in slavery from Africa to the United States, ISKCON and the Buddhist Forest Retreat Order as the arrival in the West of different forms of Eastern wisdom, Taizé as a commitment to a global sense of ecumenical reconciliation, the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries as a distinctive Islamic presence as a result of post-colonial change in Africa. By way of contrast, we have included a study of a Street Community as an investigation of a 'non-religious' community in order to ask what notion of the spiritual can be derived in such a location. Attending to the understanding of spirituality in these different communities is meant to highlight how important it is for the community in question and to indicate why it cannot be ignored as a dynamic force in contemporary life, and as an influence upon the shaping of contemporary society. In doing this, we are not suggesting that the spiritual is a panacea for contemporary global conflict, an alchemical means of producing harmony. Rather we are suggesting that different conceptions of spirituality are strong motivating forces within the politics of human communication and that we ignore this at our peril. Like nuclear power, the energy of the spiritual can produce devastating as well as beneficent effects; it depends on how you handle it and to what purpose you put it. In addition, the meaning of the term *spiritual* is transmutable. It does not have a set definition but is understood according to its relationship with other conceptions with a similar fluidity of meaning, notably religion, culture and identity.

Implicitly contested in these studies is the idea that we live in a postmodern situation in which spirituality is a form of commodity



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that is available at will and easily accessible as a product that can be included in one's lifestyle. The postmodern situation is certainly one in which we experience anxiety over identity in the face of the withering of influence of established institutional forms which once provided, for the majority, a sense of place and purpose. But those institutional forms, whether religious or nationalistic, did not necessarily over-concern themselves with the spiritual health and nurture of their members. Yet to reject any notion of spiritual discipline or observance on the basis of the rejection of those forms is to make superficial assumptions. It is to presume that the spiritual is not bound up in some notion of relationship for which one ultimately takes responsibility. Bauman remarks:

It is the uncertainties focused on *individual identity*, on its never complete construction and ever attempted dismantling-in-order-to reconstruct, which haunt modern men and women, leaving little space and time for the worries arising out of *ontological* insecurity. ... Unlike the ontological insecurity, identity focused uncertainty needs neither the carrot of heaven nor the stick of hell to create insomnia [but is prey to] ... ever new allures of the consumer feast, each promising untried kinds of happiness while wiping the shine off the tried ones.¹

Here we can say that Bauman is referring to what we may call the objectification of the spiritual which we find on the boulevards of postmodernism, and which was emerging previously, as Walter Benjamin observed, in the Paris Arcades.² Spirituality as *some thing*, to be gained by transaction and often related to an aesthetic of identity. Of course, religious emporia have been guilty of the same error in relation to purveying the opportunity of heaven and indemnity against hell, for example, in the forms of indulgences in the Catholic case and merit in the Buddhist, though these were more obviously related to concerns with next-world continuity of identity. The principal error pervading these misunderstandings of the spiritual is that of transaction. Alternatively, understanding the spiritual to be an act or process of relationship: with others, the divine, the natural world, places the emphasis on growth, reflection, responsibility, altruism and thus even denial. In this, there is a sense of not just subjectivity but inter-subjectivity. In this way, spirituality concerns itself with transcending what Bauman refers to as individual insecurity and ontological insecurity. Not an easy business, in fact not a *business*, in the transactional sense, at all.



Whether or not these studies, in their diversity, suggest to the reader that there is some spiritual hope for the future, whether they are deemed to reflect commensurability or incommensurability, direction or confusion, we offer them for consideration in this respect. We hope, at least, that they are a worthwhile contribution to mapping spirituality and its possibilities in our contemporary world, and wish to thank the contributors for taking on their respective tasks and for their specialist contributions to this volume. The views expressed and arguments presented in this Introduction and the contextualizing opening chapters to each section do not, of course, necessarily reflect their own.

Notes

1. Z. Bauman (1998), 'Postmodern religion', in P. Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 68.
2. W. Benjamin (1999), *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press). Most pertinently Benjamin remarks, 'World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish' (p. 7).



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Part I

Influential Writers and Thinkers

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1. Influential writers and thinkers

A retrospective reconsideration and a contemporary contextualization

Clive Erricker

The context

The first part of this book can be compared to what, in the art world, would be termed a series of retrospectives, a bringing together of the individual's output in order to make a current assessment on his or her reputation and influence – a reconsideration of worth and importance as a challenge to our own thinking. Within that analogy this opening chapter is somewhat akin to the brochure that you receive at the door, an entrée for guidance: a setting of the scene which makes out the reasons for selection and – for it is not a neutral document – ways of reading what you are about to view. The first thing such a document must do is argue for the selection chosen and for reasons why this 'viewing' is important, and worthy of your attention. This can be expressed as follows. All these writers and thinkers have made a considerable impact on our notions of spirituality in the latter half of the twentieth century. They have done so despite it being a century torn apart by conflict, from the Somme to East Timor, via Dresden, Hiroshima and Vietnam (to create an inadequate summary). Clive Pontin's assessment of our life and times concludes that it brought 'progress for a minority and barbarism for the overwhelming majority'.¹ His chronicle reads, as Peter Conrad has remarked, like 'a necrological horror show'.² Progress, in Pontin's summary, has little to do with the spiritual, except insofar as the comfort that proceeds from prosperity can be

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counted as such; it has to do with material well-being and wealth creation. A further commentary is provided by John Berger, a noted critic of Western ideas of progress. He reflects on Hieronymous Bosch's sixteenth-century Millennium Triptych as a prophecy of our millennial hell; he writes, 'Even if some of the terrors disappear, there are no new happinesses . . . it is [only] the modes of struggle for this happiness that change.'³ In commenting on the picture as a representation of modern society he writes:

There is no horizon there. There is no continuity between actions; there are no pauses, no paths, no pattern, no past and no future. There is only the clamour of the disparate, fragmentary present. Everywhere there are surprises and sensations, yet nowhere is there any outcome. Nothing flows through; everything interrupts. There is a kind of spatial delirium. . . . Faced with the reductionism of modern culture, human intelligence is reduced to greed.⁴

While one may take exception to my choice of quotes, authors and source of publication, they do at least represent dissenting voices who refuse to climb aboard the space shuttle of modernity. The belief in material progress bringing spiritual benefit, and extolling that if we all climb aboard we will all gain wears thin in the light of appropriate critical scrutiny. Perhaps it is not so much that we believe, but that we do not know what else to believe. We cannot conjure up any other options, or the options we are presented with require giving up too much. This is not a new situation; challenges to successive versions of modernity, by which I mean meta-narratives of progress, depend upon a willingness to listen to the individual voice, or a collective solidarity of dissenting voices, to create any effect. When it comes to the spiritual in our time, these voices can be easily dismissed or accommodated. Dismissal is a consequence of identifying them as resulting from an other-worldly spatial delirium, to use Berger's phrase, which has no plausibility. Once this was referred to as madness or heresy, now it need amount to no more than marginalization. Accommodation results from the conferral of status, often of a saintly kind, as in the case of the Dalai Lama, but this can act as insulation from needing to respond to the message in a political or economic way. The studies offered are chosen because they are all of figures who question our presumptions of human progress by recourse to spiritual visions that do not accommodate themselves to religious, scientific or economic orthodoxies and, in



their differing ways, offer hope and possibility. A brief summary is presented below.

The studies

To return, specifically, to the ‘retrospectives’ you will encounter, they are each presented with three considerations in mind: a biographical resumé; an encounter with major themes and ideas; a consideration of present and future influence. The reason for this form of presentation lies in the nature of the figures themselves, insofar as we can talk about them having a common ‘nature’. What they have to say and the way in which they live or lived out their lives are intimately related. To put it in academic terms they each challenge epistemologies that are not derived from experience. Thus biography is directly related to knowledge.

In this way these figures use an alternative discourse or, most notably with Carol Christ, an alternative grammar of dissent, which creates their distinctiveness, but also makes them susceptible to marginalization. By alternative I do not mean politically opposed, in the usual sense of that term. The idea of conflictual political opposition does not fit with the spiritual sensibilities expressed in any of the examples given. Rather we should think in terms of Lyotard’s paralogy or Derrida’s radical alterity. Here we have alternativity or dissent that seeks to disengage, to be separate from; to play a different game; not just a ‘language game’ but occupy a space beyond language, even a space beyond dissent and difference. This, of course, evokes different criticisms from different quarters. These criticisms should not be shrugged off as an unwarranted invasion of solipsistic privacy. If that were countenanced no engagement could ensue, and any impact of the originality of their ideas could be ignored. In asking what is the value of these different thinkers we are asking how we can engage with them and how, by doing so, this will affect our engagement with, and conception of, the world. At this point, it is time to provide a brief sketch of each of the studies included.

Ursula King’s study refers to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as a ‘global prophet’.⁵ His distinctiveness lies in drawing on science and religion to present a mystical vision of spiritual evolution. In this, it is science that will one day arrive at the discovery of the love of God.



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This refusal to see the aims of science and religion as distinct and incompatible was born from his passionate love for both God and the natural world. Neither were *objects* of desire since his enquiry consisted of a *relationship* with both. Mystical experience and scientific study went hand in hand bound by his unique interpretation of evolution. This did not mean ignoring human suffering and tragedy, as his posthumously published reflection on his experiences at the front in the First World War testify most vividly. As a Jesuit, he also experienced a different form of conflict with the Catholic Church. In contrast to this, his mystical writings draw on his experiences of the East, and China in particular. King focuses on these writings in examining Teilhard de Chardin's spirituality, drawing our attention to his notion of "the voyant", whose vision constructs the world anew'.⁶ In this vision there is a oneness later expressed as convergent unity and synthesis. King presents us with Teilhard de Chardin's struggle to communicate his understanding of mysticism – to move from the evolving experiences to a typological representation that overcomes oppositions. For Teilhard de Chardin mysticism was dynamic and evolving, future oriented towards further discovery; thus it bonded with science, was temporally situated and action oriented in seeking 'a change in human consciousness and self understanding'.⁷ Here we find his commitment to the problem of human progress in the contemporary world, and his concern to provide 'a spirituality, which animates and activates human beings to cope with the world rather than to inwardly escape from it'.⁸

Shirley du Boulay's study of Bede Griffiths presents us with another figure to whom conflict was no stranger, both in his outer life and his own consciousness. She remarks that 'The one universal reality that lies beyond the opposites was the goal of his journey'.⁹ Bede also identified these opposites in the religious institutions and cultural consciousnesses of his time: Christian and Hindu, East and West. The marriage of opposites is sought in the Christian Ashram and finally, in his recognition of the feminine, the body, and his meditations on love. There is the sense in which the renunciant life eventually led him to relinquish the power of and attachment to a dominating intellect and forceful presence that had been so obvious in his life. Du Boulay, appositely, points to this in stating that near the end 'he became a full human being',¹⁰ through the triumph of intuition as the way to God. In this sense, Bede Griffiths can be seen



as pointing to the insufficiency of Western understanding with its insistence on rationality, and the need to recognize this in order to embark on a more spiritual path and create a more spiritual society. This insufficiency, he claimed, had influenced Christianity in the West. Equally, he was critical of Hindu understandings, thus avoiding a shallow syncretism that his academic mind regarded as insufficient. More deeply, he held that the principle which unites transcends all forms of thought, doctrine and duality, and is found in silence. Thus, as du Boulay makes plain, Bede's thinking forms a part of the perennial philosophy 'that all religious and mystical experiences are essentially the same'.¹¹ To say this is not to invoke religious agreement, rather it gives rise to criticism. For bearing this, we should be thankful to him. As to his influence beyond his own time, we shall see. In the early twenty-first century we find ourselves caught in the tension of opposites in many forms – with regard to religion, culture, nationalism and identity in particular. His voice does not point to an abnegation of responsibility for dealing with such issues, on behalf of the contemplative, but to a means of resolution that can respect but transcend difference. In this, there is something to hear.

Danny Sullivan's reflections on Thomas Merton introduce us to a complex individual with great integrity. Again, the conflict within and the conflict with the world and its political institutions point to the difficulties of a spiritually inclined life. Again, it is the speaking from experience that gives authenticity to the writings. Sullivan's portrait recognizes Merton's early struggles and indiscipline, most obviously represented in his fathering of a child. It also points to his indefatigable purpose in speaking out against the 'sanity' that created the nuclear threat in the period of the Cold War. The popularity of Merton's writings and the range of subjects on which he chose to reflect and comment brought praise and blame, the former from often unexpected sources, such as Henry Miller; the latter, most notably, from his superiors in the Church. The irony of a hermit, as he became in his later life, being under the scrutiny of the CIA speaks to the importance of Merton's 'subversive' influence, and what Sullivan refers to as his prophetic voice. His voluminous correspondence and his openness to spiritual wisdom emanating from religious traditions other than his own sit alongside his desire for the solitary life. Sullivan invites us to understand such apparent contradiction as complementary aspects of a fiercely independent



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figure at ease with the monastic rule. The qualities he believed he lacked in relation to his mother's perceived expectations of him in early childhood appear to be manifestly present in the life he lived.

In my own consideration of Jiddu Krishnamurti, the themes of conflict and resolution which thread throughout all these studies in different ways appear centre stage. One aspect of conflict is found in his original status as the prodigy of Annie Besant, the President of the Theosophical Society, being revoked by Krishnamurti himself. He was not the 'World Teacher' she imagined him to be. A deeper conflict lay in his vision of his own mission; 'My only concern is to set men absolutely, unconditionally free', he states.¹² Yet none of his followers could claim to achieve what he pronounced. A third conflict lies in the contrast between the specificity of his own spiritual experiences and the universality of his message. Finally, his emphasis on going beyond rational enquiry and the duality of consciousness despite his own use of logical analysis to expose the futility of its own aims. Such conflicts appear contradictory if one fails to understand the difficulty of speaking of a realization that goes beyond its means of communication. In other words, Krishnamurti was identifying what he called 'the circus of consciousness'¹³ as a human limitation in relation to the poverty of thought. Such a pronouncement was not new in itself, but his chastisement of the value of tradition, religion and institutionalized authority was. In this, his emphasis on individual realization provides the cutting edge of his vision.

Geshe Thupten Jinpa presents us with a profile of the Dalai Lama that is informed by his own intimate relationship with his subject. It is also the only point at which we engage with our subject both as a leader of a major religious tradition and a head of state. This accounts for the author's description of his subject as 'most intriguing'.¹⁴ The Dalai Lama makes a distinction between religion and spirituality that both values the collective paths in their differences that relate to doctrine, and emphasizes a common quest in relation to pan-religious virtues. Thus, he maintains, inner virtues can be cultivated that transcend the particularities of religious doctrine and practice, but that the latter can act as vehicles in this respect. At the heart of this distinction is the quality of compassion. To put it more pragmatically, Thupten Jinpa reminds us of the invocation of the Dalai Lama that 'when we are born, we are free of religion; but we are not free of the need for human affection'.¹⁵ The



attainment of happiness, as the quest that the Dalai Lama offers as an ultimate goal, is much misunderstood, as Thupten Jinpa is at pains to point out. This, it seems, is a problem of cultural semantics that is not understood at a more intuitive level. Again, the Dalai Lama's statements are easily appropriated within different cultural divisions and epistemological structures, with which he is not concerned. His relationships with both Thomas Merton and, to a lesser extent, Krishnamurti give us an alternative context within which we can value and assess the meaning of his pronouncements. Perhaps the most significant point that the author alerts us to is that the Dalai Lama recognizes metaphysical claims as subservient to the quest for spiritual progress in the contemporary world.

Ruth Mantin's chapter on Carol Christ introduces us to significant new themes in late twentieth-century writing on spirituality. Of key importance are those of gender and difference, knowledge and experience, and narration. Mantin's sympathetic treatment of Christ does not overlook the difficulties in Christ's process 'thealogy'¹⁶ or criticisms of the Goddess Movement from feminist and postmodernist perspectives. What emerges most forcibly is a questioning of whether we can any longer speak of sacred texts being other than those we choose to own, those that speak to our experience; and whether such texts are any more than enabling commentaries in the compilation of our own shifting narrative – the only text we really own, or which can be given the status of 'sacred'. In ending her chapter with Christ's 'continuing effort to write thealogy out of the stories of our lives',¹⁷ Mantin emphasizes Christ's concern with the story of the individual and the problematics inherent in thealogy if it seeks to be systematic or universal, a replacement for theology. Terms such as *goddess* shift in meaning and status between the substantive, symbolic and self-referentially relative according to the genre of the narrative composed. Here we find Christ at the crossroads of modernity and postmodernity.

It is often the case that those who write or enact their lives according to certain spiritual visions that they seek to fulfil, or even according to certain cultural and religious contexts that they recognize as being imperative, are likely, in the contemporary world, to be assigned to some sort of spiritual zoo in which they can be observed and admired in their hagiographic containment.¹⁸ Within this, the saint is venerated behind the bars of the shrine, not for his or her heretical example but as one who has been domesticated in the cage of the canon. The purpose of the



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presentation of the figures in Part 1 of this volume is precisely to counter that tendency. Such containment is an implicit admission that these people are dangerous because they question our assumptions, our ways of thinking and acting, our acceptance of things as they are. In the case of Teilhard de Chardin, we are challenged to transformative action through mystical contemplation. Bede Griffiths offers a means of bridging oppositional conflicts to achieve a more spiritual society. Thomas Merton encourages us to question the 'sanity' of the world and its leaders. Krishnamurti questions our rational delusions and our conception of human progress, inviting individuals to own authority for themselves. The Dalai Lama urges us to put virtue and ethical action above all differences. Carol Christ demands that the pervasive influence of patriarchy be challenged in the recognition of the goddess. There are also themes that thread through these writings: love, hope, perseverance, and the refusal to accept the world as soulless, fragmented or a place of inevitable conflict and alienation. Most importantly, we are not offered simplistic solutions to perennial problems. In different ways, these voices call on us to turn the world upside-down, by different means than those that inspire most revolutions but with no less spiritual conviction.¹⁹

The challenge to conceptions of knowledge and morality

So far, we have considered these writers in relation to the events of our times. Now I wish to reflect on how they fit into the intellectual changes, as well as the world of ideas that we inhabit. In a reflection on the state of theology within modernity, Phillip Blond writes:

for now let me simplify the modern, and suggest that the principle of modernity that lies at the heart of the secular is the principle of self-sufficient finitude. A principle that owes its existence not to any concern to save faith, but rather from a requirement to secure the possibility of knowledge.²⁰

The idea that knowledge is secured without any account being taken of faith signifies the shift in understanding of knowledge from a theological context, prior to the Enlightenment in the 'pre-modern' period, during which it was related to religious doctrine and revelation, to one owned by science, through rationalism and



empiricism. However, faith is not necessarily to be equated with religious doctrine, as both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard observed in their writings, in contesting the rival hegemonic claims of metaphysics, rationalism and empiricism to the ownership of knowledge. Latterly, this challenge has entered a postmodern phase, expressed in the 'post-Christianity' of Don Cupitt and the a/theology of Mark C. Taylor. Cupitt writes:

we are now settling down into our new postmodern condition . . . we are becoming aware that rupture has occurred. History has 'ended' . . . we no longer have any form of the old belief in progress or in linear eschatological time . . . leaving the institutions that depended upon them in crisis. . . . Tradition is dying, the past has lost its old authority.²¹

Within this vacuum of authority faith is cast adrift from both doctrine and truth; there is only the individual, living in the fluidity of time and culture. The notion of the spiritual has been appropriated within all the above contexts – pre-modern, modern and postmodern – to different effect and to inspire different allegiances. However, if the spiritual is to have any credence it must be intimately related to moral effect. Only in a world made better can a call to a more spiritual life be justified. The problem, of course, is that the call comes before the effect; it has to be acted upon in trust. In this respect a call to a radically different outlook on life that involves a degree of insecurity and risk, material and psychological, is only likely to attract once other mainstream alternatives have proved bankrupt. In this respect, despite its pessimistic conclusion, Zigmunt Bauman's observations offer hope.

No victory over inhumanity seems to have made the world safer for humanity. Moral triumphs, apparently, do not accumulate; in spite of the narratives of progress, movement is not linear – yesterday's gains are not reinvested, nor are the bonuses once awarded irreversible. Ever anew, with each shift in the balance of power, the spectre of inhumanity returns from its exile.²²

Here Bauman echoes the theme with which I began this chapter concerning the twentieth century. The question that remains is to what extent can a consideration of and engagement with the figures included in this 'retrospective' help us in this spiritual and moral dilemma. Clearly, the first thing is that they challenge our conventional idea of progress. They take on conflict as a matter of course, as an inevitable necessity, both within and without, in their



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personal and public lives. For Krishnamurti this meant renouncing the imposition of a title placed upon him by the Theosophical Society and relinquishing institutional support in his denunciation of tradition. For Christ it meant relinquishing tenureship at an American university to inhabit an environment she found more spiritually conducive, but less financially secure, in the Aegean. For Merton, Bede Griffiths and Teilhard de Chardin there were the tensions evoked between them and the authorities of their Christian denominations. For the Dalai Lama there is the still enduring conflict with the Chinese domination of Tibet. Perhaps the most radical implication of the majority of these figures to conflict is to employ renunciant strategies, to refuse to be drawn into either physical or militaristic conflict to achieve their spiritual aims, and yet not to shy away from judgement on difficult moral issues. This is so clearly the opposite of all conventional political rhetoric and strategy that it marks out their spiritual stance, weds it to a moral imperative and casts them in opposition to most conventional thinking. It refutes the basis on which progress and moral order is achieved and confirms Bauman's assessment that no progress is made by virtue of combating inhumanity with inhuman means.

In relation to our intellectual climate, we are presented with equally problematic challenges. None of these figures fits easily into the historical distinction of pre-modern, modern and postmodern. They occupy a space of epistemological insouciance. In Merton's phrase, 'not a bad place in which to pass wind'²³ in relation to academic pronouncements on the state of knowledge. Thus they contest the status we usually confer on rational and ideological discourse, to varying degrees. Krishnamurti identifies philosophy as not a serious pursuit, while Teilhard de Chardin regards science as essential to our spiritual evolution. Christ calls on the narrative of the subject to replace objectivity, while Bede Griffiths affirms a perennial philosophy that transcends religious difference, and the Dalai Lama affirms that virtue must transcend the doctrines of religion and embrace secularism. We cannot easily equate the spiritual visions offered; they are intimately related to the experiences of the individual lives and the tensions within those lives. However, differences between them are, in part, a reflection of the period in which they were or are living and writing. Thus, moving from Teilhard de Chardin to Carol Christ we cover a historical period from the First World War to our entry into the



twenty-first century. However, the main purpose of these studies is not to provide a historical record but to present each subject for contemporary consideration. Without wishing to speak of sainthood or to identify any of these figures as postmodern, Edith Wyschogrod's comments on the postmodern saintly life offer a suitable reflection within which to consider them, and to challenge ourselves:

The postmodern saintly life as a new path in ethics is not a proposal to revert to an older hagiographic discourse, least of all to hide behind its metaphysical presuppositions. It is instead a plea for boldness and risk, for an effort to develop a new altruism in an age grown cynical and hardened to catastrophe. ... In an epoch grown weary not only of its calamities but of its ecstasies, of its collective political fantasies that destroyed millions of lives, and of its chemically induced stupors and joys ... postmodern saints derive their modes of action from their immediate modernist predecessors as well as from traditional hagiography ... to fashion lives of compassion and generosity.²⁴

Notes

1. C. Pontin (1998), *Progress and Barbarism: The World in the Twentieth Century* (London: Chatto and Windus).
2. P. Conrad, 'Spectres at the feast', *Guardian Saturday Review*, 11 July 1998, p. 8.
3. J. Berger, 'Welcome to the abyss', *Guardian Saturday Review*, 20 November 1999, p. 1.
4. *Ibid.*
5. See this volume, p. 15.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
16. Thealogy is a feminist adaptation of theology, an indication that the latter is from a patriarchal perspective.
17. C. Christ (1987), *The Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row), p. 11.



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18. Using a different metaphor to similar purpose E.M. Cioran wrote, 'An angel protected by a policeman – that is how truths die, that is how enthusiasms expire'. E.M. Cioran (1990), *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Quartet), p. 74.
19. See Christopher Hill (1975), *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
20. P. Blond (1998), 'The primacy of theology and the question of perception', in Paul Heelas (ed.), *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 287.
21. D. Cupitt (1998), 'Post-Christianity', in Heelas (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 218.
22. Z. Bauman (1993), *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 228–9.
23. See this volume, p. 61.
24. E. Wyschogrod (1997), 'Saints and some aporias of postmodernism', in G. Ward (ed.), *The Postmodern God* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 353–4.



2. Mysticism and contemporary society

Some Teilhardian reflections

Ursula King

Introduction

As a fervent Christian mystic and prolific religious writer, the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin had much to say about spirituality in the contemporary world. When alive, he was best known as a distinguished scientist of human origins, but since his death in 1955 it is above all the large body of his posthumously published religious writings which have attracted worldwide attention. Teilhard de Chardin not only reflected with audacious courage on the contemporary meaning of the Christian gospel, but also on the significance of religious pluralism and interfaith encounter in a world shaped by modern science and technology. His works convey a vibrant spirituality linking the insights of science, religion and mysticism.

Religion as the deepest source of human energy and meaning is one of the central themes of his thought. According to him, religion has held a central place in human evolution and will hold such a place in the future development of the human community, for he sees the entire world involved in a process of spiritual transformation linked to the rise of consciousness and the spirit. What he calls the 'mystical sense' of human beings – a fundamental quest for oneness and unification – is now assuming global and planetary dimensions because the 'mystical temperature' is rising to the same extent that human consciousness and self-reflection are growing. Teilhard de Chardin has rightly been called a 'global prophet' whose ideas are widely referred to all over the world, not only in books and discussions, but today also on the internet.



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Already in 1937 he had written an important essay on 'The phenomenon of spirituality' wherein he discusses the place of spirituality within human development.¹ His general understanding of spirituality is closely linked to that of mysticism, to which he also refers in many of his writings. To summarize briefly, one can say that his lifelong study of the evolution of the 'human phenomenon' in all its amplitude – human origins in the past, the nature of human beings, and society in the present and future – led him to assign a central place to religion in human development. But the centre of all religion consists in the 'phenomenon of spirituality' which in turn centres around the 'phenomenon of mysticism', the abiding source of all true spirituality. The highest expression of mysticism is found in the 'phenomenon of love'. Thus his essay on 'The phenomenon of spirituality' concludes with the words, 'The definitive discovery of the phenomenon of the spirit is bound up with the analysis (which science will one day finally undertake) of the "mystical phenomenon", that is of the love of God.'²

An overview of Teilhard's life and works

Born in 1881 in the volcanic Auvergne in central France, Teilhard belonged to an ancient aristocratic family related to Voltaire. His development was deeply influenced by his natural environment and a traditional Catholic family milieu, marked by a vibrant faith and strong religious practice. Teilhard was endowed with a deeply pantheistic and mystical orientation, evident from his earliest childhood years. This mystical inclination was further nurtured by the saintly figure of his mother, whereas his scientific interests were initially stimulated by his father, who taught his children to collect fossils, stones and other natural specimens, thereby laying the foundations for Teilhard's subsequent scientific career.

After an excellent education at a Jesuit boarding school Teilhard entered the Jesuit novitiate at the age of 18. Torn between a passionate love for God and an equally passionate love for understanding the natural world, he was uncertain whether to choose one at the expense of the other, but resolved his personal crisis by recognizing that he could combine his search for spiritual perfection with that for greater knowledge and understanding of the world. When the French Jesuits were exiled from France, Teilhard



continued his theological studies for quite a few years in the south of England, at Hastings, where he was ordained a Catholic priest in 1911. From 1905 to 1908, he was sent to Egypt to teach physics and chemistry in a Jesuit school in Cairo. It was there that he first discovered his great attraction to the East. Years later this experience led him to write with great lyrical beauty about his decisive encounter with cosmic and mystical life.

It was earlier, in Hastings, after reading Bergson's book *Creative Evolution*, that Teilhard underwent a profound change in his thinking through recognizing the deep significance of the process of evolution for the Christian faith. Evolution made him see the world anew as being immersed in an immense stream of evolutionary creation, where everything is animated by a 'christic element', and where the heart of God is found at the heart of the world. His deeply mystical experiences were followed by scientific studies in Paris, but these were interrupted by the outbreak of the First World War during which he served as stretcher-bearer at the front. It was during the painful warfare of the trenches that Teilhard discovered another facet of his lifelong vision: the great diversity and powerful tensions of the 'human milieu', and the deep affinity between all human beings. This important insight laid the foundations for his future speculations about the oneness of humanity and the perception of the 'noosphere' as a layer or web of thought and love covering the globe.

Almost daily encounters with death at the front gave him an extraordinary sense of urgency to leave an 'intellectual testament', to communicate his powerful spiritual vision of the world which, in spite of all its turmoil and struggles, he saw as animated by and drawn up towards God. Thus he wrote a series of deeply stirring personal essays interspersed with prayers and powerful confessions of faith, which were only published after his death as *Writings in Time of War*.³ These are some of his most personal yet least known writings.

Later, after the war, Teilhard obtained a doctorate for his scientific research and was appointed a lecturer in geology at the Institut Catholique in Paris. There he could propound his ideas about evolution and the Christian faith, but these soon led him into difficulties with his church, difficulties which increased throughout his life. In 1923 he was glad to take up an invitation to join another Jesuit researcher on a fossil expedition in China. This trip to the Far



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East was another decisive experience which shaped him for the rest of his life, and it also led to the writing of the spiritual essay *The Mass on the World*. Inspired by the glorious vision of the world at dawn transfigured by the rising sun over the steppes of Asia, this prose poem expresses a deeply mystical offering of the entire cosmos to the energy, fire, power and presence of the divine Spirit.⁴

Over the following years Teilhard's position in Paris grew more difficult, so that China, where he spent the years 1926 to 1946, became a place of almost permanent exile interspersed with numerous travels in the East and West. It was in China that he wrote most of his essays and also his two books, the spiritual classic *Le Milieu Divin* (1927),⁵ and *The Phenomenon of Man* (1938–40),⁶ his best-known but also most difficult work. After the Second World War Teilhard returned to Paris, but as his relations with the church were still difficult, he accepted a research post in the United States which he occupied for the last four years of his life. He died in New York on Easter Sunday 1955.⁷ Through his religious and philosophical works, published during more than twenty years following his death, he became widely known all over the world, but his thought is often poorly understood because of the intrinsic difficulty of his complex ideas and the unsystematic way in which his works were published. His ideas about spirituality and mysticism are interspersed throughout all his works, but also have several essays explicitly devoted to them. They touch on so many themes that I have to be selective, and I have chosen to concentrate on his understanding of mysticism because of the great contemporary interest in this subject.⁸

Teilhard's thought on mysticism

The primary matrix for Teilhard's understanding of mysticism was provided by his own experience. Autobiographical references in his works point to a deep unity of life and thought linked to formative mystical experiences which structured what he called his 'fundamental vision'. The indispensable key for unlocking this experiential and mystical quality of his work is the late essay 'The heart of matter', a brief spiritual autobiography written in 1950. A further elaboration and moving expression of this mystical vision is found in 'The christic' (1955), completed shortly before his death.⁹



However, there are many other clues in earlier essays, diaries and letters. In fact, his earliest attempt to describe his spiritual development goes back to 1918 when he first outlined several elements of his mystical experience in the essay 'My universe'.¹⁰ The experience came first; it provided the nucleus from which he developed a philosophy, a theology, and an integral worldview which included an interpretation of mysticism comprising a partly new understanding of spirituality. In the early essays collected in *Writings in Time of War*, Teilhard frequently refers to the experience of the mystic seer, the 'voyant', whose vision constructs the world anew – he experiences and sees something new which he wants to communicate to others. What did Teilhard see, and what did he want to say to us?

The unfolding of his vision is vividly described in 'The heart of matter' (1950). From earliest childhood Teilhard had had certain decisive experiences which made him seek something absolute, permanent and everlasting which was at the same time tangible and concrete. At first, this search expressed itself in a passion for collecting rocks and stones; later, it was the contact with nature on a grander scale further intensified through his scientific interests and studies.

As a child and young man Teilhard had several mystic experiences which he described later as a realization of cosmic consciousness. When he was able to articulate these experiences, he became fully aware that all he could ever write was only a feeble echo of what he had lived and felt with such intensity. The experience of the fundamental oneness, beauty and divine quality of nature revealed a monistic and pantheistic inclination, a nature mysticism which remained with him all his life, although it underwent several important modifications.

During his years of studying theology in Hastings (1908–12), the strong attraction to nature grew more intensive through discovering the meaning of evolution. The full realization of the importance of evolution became central to his approach to the cosmos as also for the reinterpretation of his religious beliefs, particularly his understanding of Christ. The cosmic and christic sense, which he later described as the two sides of his being, converged into a powerful vision of the universal and cosmic Christ, a symbol of great integrative force. It is a vision which remains inseparable from the mystical quality of his nature experiences, but the monistic



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pantheism of earlier years had gradually been prolonged and transcended into what he occasionally referred to as 'pan-christic monism', and what might also be called a person-centred theistic mysticism.

A further formative experience relates to his contact with the East, especially his long stay in China. Teilhard unequivocally stated in 'The heart of matter' that his pan-christic mysticism matured 'in the two great atmospheres of Asia and the War'.¹¹ These two experiences were complementary and found their final expression in two of his most important writings on spirituality, *The Mass on the World* (1923) and *Le Milieu Divin* (1927).

China became the major field of his professional scientific activity and deeply influenced his thinking. The experience of China revealed to him the immensity of the Earth and its peoples. He later judged the invitation to come to China as 'the decisive event of his destiny'.¹² Without it he would not have developed his vision of convergent unity and synthesis the way he did. This is as true of his understanding of religion and mysticism as it is of other aspects of his work. His many essays express the fundamental continuity and coherence of a mystical vision over a lifetime. Given the need to interpret these experiences to himself and to others, he enquired into the phenomenon of mysticism inside and outside Christianity. Comparisons with the experience of other mystics were initially personally motivated; they were undertaken to illuminate or explicate his own experience, and this accounts for some of the limitations of his approach.

Many commentators have recognized the mystical quest of Teilhard's life, but whereas his Christ-centred mysticism has been frequently discussed, his typological interpretation and emphasis on the importance of mysticism for the future of religion and society have received far less attention. There has also been an overriding tendency to interpret Teilhard's general worldview, centred in the emergence of the 'noosphere' or the sphere of thought surrounding the globe, and his understanding of mysticism in an exclusively intellectualist manner. He himself objected to this since the fundamental harmony of the universe he felt, the integral vision he saw, could not be easily expressed in words, but was more like a melody or taste to be perceived.

From early on Teilhard criticized too narrow a definition of mysticism. He himself uses the word 'mysticism' in a comprehensive



sense without restricting it only to extraordinary contemplative or unitive experiences. On the one hand, he links mysticism to a continuum of progressively more centred experiences, ranging from pantheistic over monistic to theistic forms; on the other hand, mysticism stands for the goal of all spiritual life and becomes synonymous with the deepest layer of human spirituality. This can only be realized by integrating a person's outer activities with the inner life of the spirit, centred in the dynamic powers of love.

He criticized Christian theology for its tendency to give the word 'mystical' a minimum of organic or physical meaning. This is due to 'the very common mistake of regarding the spiritual as an attenuation of the material, whereas it is in fact the material carried beyond itself: it is super-material'.¹³ He also referred to 'the vast and polymorphous domain of mysticism'.¹⁴ It was his comparatively wide reading which, more than his own experience, made him aware of the variety of phenomena designated by the term 'mysticism'. But unlike others, Teilhard did not argue for a sharp break between natural pantheism on one hand and religious mysticism of a monistic, or theistic, kind on the other. He saw these different experiences as continuous and organically interrelated, although each possesses a distinctive element of its own.

Structurally and ontologically, Teilhard always distinguished between two basic types of mysticism as fundamental alternatives or even opposites. His terminology is inconsistent and rather fluid, yet whatever the terms used, the polarity is always clearly present. The two basic types of mysticism are described as 'two solutions to the problem of the one and the many' (1931), 'two roads of spiritualization' (1932), 'two converse forms of the spirit' (1950), or 'two principal ways tried by the mystics' (1951). Although this changing terminology is confusing, a comparative analysis of Teilhard's writings reveals certain common features of his typological interpretation of mysticism.

Different types of mysticism are often distinguished on the basis of whether fundamentally unitive experiences are understood as absorption into, or union with, the Absolute. Coming from the dynamic perspective of evolutionary thinking, Teilhard hinges his distinction of two basic types of mysticism on the *process of unification*. The very choice of the word implies that it is not simply a question of the union of two given terms, i.e. the human person and the Absolute, but a dynamic process of successive 'centring'.



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This involves the inner unification or integration of the self as well as the outer unification of what surrounds people, that is to say, other human beings as well as work and nature. This process of unification has such a central importance in Teilhard's worldview that it is sharply set off from any *mysticism of identification* which, in his view, was traditionally mainly prevalent in the East, and is summarily and quite wrongly referred to as the 'road of the East', whereas he sees the new 'road of the West' linked to a *mysticism of unification*.

There are many texts which express the fundamental distinction of these two basic types of mysticism. The main difference between a *mysticism of identification* and a *mysticism of unification* is the absence or presence of personal love. It must be stressed that Teilhard's basic typology must not be understood to simply reiterate the distinction between a monistic and theistic type of mysticism. The presence of personal love implies more than a loving relationship of union between the human person and God. It means more than a simple coming together, for it includes at the same time a complex and increasingly convergent process of unification. Thus the meaning of love itself is altered through being understood in a much more dynamic sense because love itself is transformed by the process of evolution. Even when Teilhard refers elsewhere simply to 'union' or 'unity', he still associates the idea of unification with these terms.

Some texts emphasize less the process of unification as opposed to identification than a basic polarity expressed through a predominantly forward or upward orientation in the mystic. The inherent tension of these two orientations is transcended through a third direction, which represents a new synthesis. Teilhard referred to these different orientations as *via prima*, *via secunda* and *via tertia*. Diagrammatically this can be presented as in Figure 1.

This is a schematic representation of what might be called the recurrent leitmotiv of Teilhard's entire work, first expressed in the motto of his essay 'Cosmic life' (1916): 'There is a communion with God, and a communion with earth, and a communion with God through earth.'¹⁵ The 'communion with earth' initially referred to his experience of monistic pantheism; later it came to stand for any merely immanent or inner-worldly attitude. 'Communion with God' describes an excessively other-worldly attitude, an understanding of God and religion as separate from the world. An exclusive concern



Via secunda

soul- and God-mysticism

('communion with God')

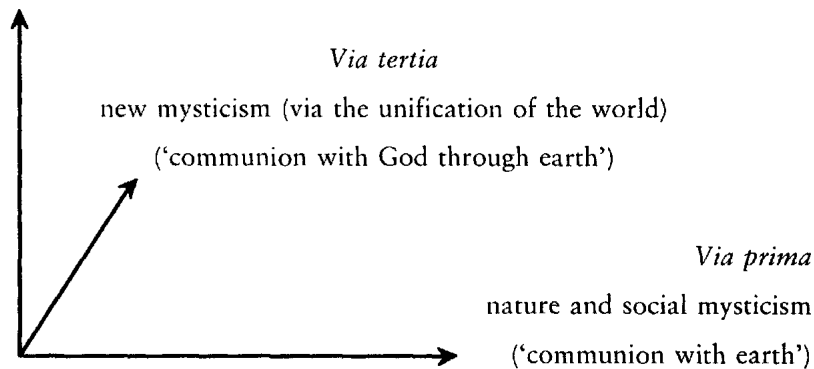


Figure 1

for transcendence, often regarded as the main characteristic of the religious quest, does not give enough importance to the value of human effort and the development of the world, the building of the Earth. The two attitudes – 'communion with earth' and 'communion with God' – are incomplete and deficient. What is sought is a 'communion with God through earth' or a new synthesis wherein the religious and mystical are closely interwoven with our experience of the natural world and social life. This is why Teilhard's mysticism can be aptly described as a new 'mysticism of action'.

Significant features of Teilhard's mysticism of action

Teilhard understood the search for unification via the tangible world as, initially at least, a fundamentally Western preoccupation. The concern for the value of the material world is closely rooted in the Christian understanding of the incarnation. Yet the full implications of an incarnational approach – i.e. the transformation and sanctification of all human and earthly realities – take on an altogether different dimension with the relatively modern discovery and analysis of what these realities are. With the advancing precision and exponential growth of our scientific knowledge, the limits of the



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real are forever pushed back further. The world around us is forever expanding and shrinking at the same time. For Teilhard, the ongoing search for knowledge, based on ever more advanced and detailed research in the sciences, is paralleled by the continuing mystic search for greater unification and oneness in religion.

This interrelated quest for oneness made Teilhard speak of a 'new mysticism' where unity is achieved through ultra-differentiation. Many passages could be quoted where the idea of a new 'mysticism of evolution', of a 'mysticism of action' is expressed, suggesting a new spiritual vision related to the development of a new world. Teilhard's understanding of mysticism cannot be solely assessed by reference to the mystics of the past because his interpretation of mysticism is so strongly future oriented and is also basically evaluative. The *mysticism of identification* and that of *unification* are not simple equivalents, but one type is seen as more developed, fuller, richer, truer.

Teilhard primarily sought a new formulation for a mysticism of the West, that is to say, a mysticism rooted in the Christian doctrines of creation and incarnation, but expressed in a new manner. Whereas in his earlier years he presented Christianity as 'the very religion of evolution',¹⁶ he later increasingly stressed the need for a deep transformation of his own religious tradition. What is needed in his view is no longer simply a 'Christianity faithfully extended to its utmost limit', but a 'Christianity which surpasses itself', the emergence of something 'trans-Christian' in theology and mysticism. It was in this sense that he talked about 'the urgent need for the formulation of a mysticism of the West', a 'new mysticism, at once fully human and fully Christian' which could be the source of a new energy for which 'we have as yet no name!' Christian love is given a decisive place in his interpretation of mysticism, but it is also stressed that this love – identified as the 'Christian mystical act *par excellence*' – has not yet found its fullest expression, that is to say, it has to grow further and become more universalized.¹⁷

All these formulations indicate suggestive explorations in need of further development. Weighing up different texts, particularly those of later years, one realizes Teilhard's awareness of the necessary, in fact essential, contribution of Eastern religious insights to a newly emerging mysticism which, instead of being merely a mysticism of the West, in fact represents a 'new mysticism of convergence'.¹⁸ The growing contact and dialogue between members of different world



faiths is of great importance in this respect. Although interfaith encounter and theological reflections on interreligious dialogue have by now considerably moved beyond what Teilhard himself experienced and articulated, his ideas on the convergence of religions still provide stimulating reading, but cannot be discussed further here. What is generally not known, however, is that Teilhard was quite a pioneer in interfaith thinking and was closely associated with the founding of the French branch of *The World Congress of Faiths* in 1947.¹⁹

Teilhard's thoughts on mysticism are based on the premise that the spiritual quest is not perennially the same. A change in human consciousness and self-understanding, linked to new historical, scientific and social developments, has brought about a situation where the spiritual needs of human individuals and groups have come into sharper focus. The closer coming together of humankind observable in many areas of human endeavour also requires a new approach to the understanding and practice of spirituality. It is this need, born from a historically new situation, which Teilhard felt with extraordinary depth and intensity unlike few others. Based on formative mystical experiences and a lifelong reflection on the meaning of mysticism, he put forward a particular interpretation which diverges from that of other writers in several respects.

An important aspect of this interpretation lies in the fact that, in his view, the integration of the inner self and the search for an Absolute do not occur independently from time. Given modern developments, an adequate religious worldview for the present and the future cannot be entirely modelled on patterns of the past. To seek ultimate unity implies at the same time a changed relationship between human beings and all other phenomena in the cosmos; thus it must be accompanied by a process of unification. Consequently, the understanding and practice of mysticism is closely linked to a new emphasis on the importance of human action and accompanying ethical issues. It is, in fact, in and through action that the spirit unfolds, and that spirituality grows. Spirituality is no longer simply a problem of inwardness as in the mysticism of the past; on the contrary, the problem of human action and responsible decision-making, together with the choice of right values and beliefs on which to base such action, are the major problems of the spirit today.

This fundamental stress on the newness of present time ultimately overcomes and transcends the past divisions in space, linked to



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separate religious developments in East and West. What can the religious teachings of the past, whether Eastern or Western, contribute to the 'building of the Earth' now, to the future shaping of humanity and the planet? What general structures can be discerned in the mysticisms of the past, and how far are these either relevant or redundant for a relevant, responsible, contemporary spirituality? These were some of the main questions motivating Teilhard's enquiry into the nature of mysticism. Moved by these questions, he looked for the active and animating elements in different religious traditions, for pointers towards a new religious breakthrough, and for an as yet unformulated new mysticism.

Teilhard evaluated religious and mystical traditions according to their capacity to supply the deepest sources of energy for human action. In the last years of his life, he was particularly concerned with developing a 'science of human energetics',²⁰ understood as a systematic study of the required energy for further human self-evolution. Ultimately, Teilhard looked for unity, homogeneity and coherence in the understanding of mysticism in the context of modern science, relating religious awareness to the development of modern consciousness. Although science cannot determine our image of God, given the course of its growth, it nevertheless rules out certain approaches to the Absolute and to worship. For the religions of the past 'the problem of human progress (as we understand it today) did not arise',²¹ but this problem is assuming ever greater urgency today. It is linked to the development of modern science and technology, frequently misunderstood as something merely external, and even more to a progressive change in human consciousness, individual as well as social, to what Teilhard calls 'the rise of the noosphere', which some of his readers understand today as being exponentially enhanced through the fast growth of worldwide electronic communications, especially the internet, satellite television and cellular telephones.

Religious teaching and practice must meaningfully relate to contemporary society's most urgent task of 'building the earth' and the need for creating a peaceful, just and ecologically harmonious world for all. Thus, mysticism must be linked to social and practical life, providing a spirituality which animates and activates human beings to cope with the world rather than inwardly to escape from it. The primary emphasis here is not so much on a 'this-worldly' as against an 'other-worldly' attitude than on what has been described



as a *changeful* orientation towards the world, that is to say, on the capacity for transformative action and decisive moral choices.

This search for a harmonious balance between the unification of the world and a person's inner life introduces an element of newness into the understanding of mysticism and includes aspects usually thought of as separate. Mysticism is no longer primarily the pursuit of contemplatives, open to monastics and ascetics, but an experience potentially open to all. It is closely connected to our new universe story, to the place of humans within the cosmic stream of life, to the whole natural and social world, made dynamic through convergence and unifying action. Teilhard's mysticism of action is simply a mysticism of unification, a mysticism of transformation and a mysticism of sanctification. It is a vision of wholeness closely linked to 'a new definition of holiness'²² we are so much in need of, as he once said.

This mysticism of action is set within an evolutionary dynamic of a world in transformation. Teilhard saw the world as a 'divine milieu', filled with a diaphanous divine luminosity capable of penetrating, transforming and transfiguring everything. This powerful spiritual vision is ultimately grounded in his deep Christian faith and his mystical perception of the cosmic Christ, which I cannot discuss here.²³ Thus it is equally correct to speak of Teilhard's 'pan-christic mysticism'. Furthermore, when taking into account his frequent use of the traditional Christian mystical images of fire and the heart, one can also characterize Teilhard's own, deeply personal, spirituality as an ardent fire and heart mysticism. His understanding of mysticism is linked to all that we are, all that we do and all that we suffer, to the entire process of what he called in his book *The Divine Milieu* 'the divinisation of our activities' and 'of our passivities'. His mysticism of action can therefore also be described as a 'mysticism of the divine milieu' because for him human activity in all its forms is capable of divinization. As F. C. Happold pointed out in his comparative study of mysticism, for Teilhard, 'union with God was not through withdrawal from the activity of the world but through a dedicated, integrated, and sublimated absorption in it'.²⁴

Mysticism and contemporary society

Too often perhaps mysticism is seen as primarily a historical phenomenon. Yet we must ask: What is its importance for our



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society today? This raises a host of further questions about the practice of mysticism in relation to personal spirituality and social action. Is mysticism primarily an individual experience or is it, on the contrary, a relational phenomenon which, through its influence on and interaction with others, has wide social implications?

Detailed discussions exist about possible criteria for distinguishing between mystical experience as different from numinous, ecstatic or religious experience. Such discussions may be of great interest to scholars of mysticism, but are perhaps less central to those concerned with the practice of mystical spirituality in contemporary society. Here the question is really how to become a mystic. Is this possible by self-effort alone or, to speak in religious terms, is divine grace required? What is the relationship between mystical consciousness and rational and ethical aspects of the human being? Do the ideals and practices of mystics have a conservative or a profoundly transforming and revolutionary effect on society at large?

Richard Kirby, in *The Mission of Mysticism* (1979), has argued that mysticism has a mission to both the individual and the human race, while Adam Curle, in *Mystics and Militants* (1972), relates the heightening of personal awareness to the growth of strong identity and transformative social action. In these, as in other cases, 'mysticism' is broadly defined as deep personal transformation linked to an expansion of consciousness, a centred, heightened awareness. The spiritual path pursued is not necessarily linked to one traditional religious 'way', but makes use of methods, teachings, images and symbols from different religious traditions. Although remarkable convergences occur, this raises the further question of how far mysticism can be practised independently from religion. Psychotherapists, like Arthur J. Deikman in *The Observing Self* (1982), have argued that the mystical tradition has been concerned with the very problems that modern psychiatry has been unable to resolve, namely the problems of meaning, the observing self and the effect of motivation on consciousness. The insights of mysticism may thus be used for health and human development independently from religious traditions. Others draw selectively on the insights of several mystical traditions to highlight parallels found in modern science, especially in the understanding of cosmos, matter and energy in the new physics.

In spite of striking parallels we can also note divergent tendencies in the way different writers assess the value of mysticism for



contemporary society. Whatever the overriding criteria by which comparisons and evaluations are made, there seems to be a general consensus pointing towards an increasing appreciation of the importance of mysticism and the example of past mystics, beyond the original context of their own religious tradition. Mystics from all religious traditions, however diverse, seem to provide exemplars of a vision of faith, of a fundamental quality of life and being, which transcend and point beyond the doctrinal limitations of their respective religions. This can also be said with reference to contemporary women's spirituality, where female mystics from the past provide empowering examples for women today to develop women's autonomy and agency, but also a large spiritual vision drawing on the spiritual heritage of women from many different faiths.

Given the constraints of space, it is not possible here to compare Teilhard de Chardin's vision of a 'new mysticism' – a mysticism of action, convergence and transformation – with the striking parallels found in other twentieth-century spiritual teachers, whether Sri Aurobindo, Krishnamurti, Swami Abhishiktananda, Simone Weil, Dorothy Day or Thomas Merton. Some of these figures are presented elsewhere in this volume, and readers will no doubt discover strong similarities, but also sharp differences in the way these thinkers relate their spirituality to the contemporary world. We urgently need a new spirituality and mysticism to help us shape a fresh global vision and social ethic for the greater unification of humankind. To achieve this transformation it is not only helpful but imperative to explore the rich diversity of all mystical spiritualities, as Teilhard de Chardin was wont to emphasize. In this one can certainly fully agree with him, even if one does not always accept his understanding of mysticism in all its details.

Notes

1. The essay is found in P. Teilhard de Chardin (1969), *Human Energy* (London: Collins) (hereafter abbreviated as *HE*), pp. 93–112.
2. *HE*, p. 112.
3. P. Teilhard de Chardin (1968), *Writings in Time of War* (London: Collins) (hereafter *WTW*).



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4. The text is found in P. Teilhard de Chardin (1978), *The Heart of Matter* (London: Collins) (hereafter *HM*) and also in the paperback (1965) *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins, Fontana Books).
5. Published in 1960 (London: Collins).
6. Originally published in English in 1959 as the first volume of his collected works, this book is now available in a new, more accurate and poetic translation by Sarah Appleton-Weber as *The Human Phenomenon* (Brighton/Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 1999).
7. For fuller details about his life see my illustrated biography (1996), *Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).
8. Other themes are explored in Ursula King (1989), *The Spirit of One Earth: Reflections on Teilhard de Chardin and Global Spirituality* (New York: Paragon House) and (1997), *Christ in All Things: Exploring Spirituality with Teilhard de Chardin – The 1996 Bampton Lectures* (London: SCM Press and Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books).
9. Both essays are found in *HM*, pp. 15–79, 80–102.
10. *HM*, pp. 196–208.
11. *HM*, p. 47.
12. See *HM*, p. 153; my translation, closer to the French original *Le Coeur de la matière*, p. 194.
13. P. Teilhard de Chardin (1971), *Christianity and Evolution* (London: Collins) (hereafter *CE*), p. 68.
14. *CE*, p. 102.
15. *WTW*, p. 14.
16. *CE*, p. 93.
17. These quotations are taken from various essays, letters and unpublished notes of Teilhard's reading.
18. See especially his essay 'The spiritual contribution of the Far East', in P. Teilhard de Chardin (1975), *Toward the Future* (London: Collins) (hereafter *TF*), pp. 134–47. I have discussed Teilhard's understanding of mysticism and Eastern religions in U. King (1980), *Towards a New Mysticism: Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions* (London: Collins, and New York: Seabury Press), and more recently (1995) in 'Teilhard's reflections on Eastern religions revisited', *Zygon, Journal of Religion and Science* (30.1), pp. 45–70.
19. I have discussed this at length in *The Spirit of One Earth* (see n. 8).
20. Mentioned in P. Teilhard de Chardin (1959), *The Phenomenon of Man* (London: Collins), p. 283; this idea is often discussed in letters and notes of Teilhard's last years of life.
21. *TF*, p. 105.
22. *HE*, p. 110.



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23. See James A. Lyons (1982), *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), but especially my book (1997), *Christ in All Things* (see n. 8), and my article (1999), ‘“Consumed by fire from within”: Teilhard de Chardin’s pan-christic mysticism in relation to the Catholic tradition’, *The Heythrop Journal* (40.4), pp. 456–77.
24. F.C. Happold (1971), *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (London: Penguin), p. 394.

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3. Bede Griffiths and the one universal reality

Shirley du Boulay

A resumé of his life

Alan Richard Griffiths, one of the twentieth century's greatest spiritual pioneers, was born in 1906, the fourth and youngest child of a very English, very middle-class, very Anglican family. When he was 4 years old his father, a manufacturing chemist from Liverpool, went bankrupt and as a result developed neurasthenia, a kind of nervous debility. The children were brought up by Lilian, a model of unselfish life to whom Alan (as he was then called) was devoted and with whom he felt he had 'a relationship of total one-ness'.¹

The Second World War had just ended when Alan was sent to Christ's Hospital, a severely Protestant school run as a charity, though the boys had to sit a competitive entrance examination in which Alan, who was exceptionally bright, came top. It was during his last term while wandering around the school playing fields one evening that he had an experience of God in nature so powerful that it proved to be the catalyst which inspired his lifetime's search. From that moment everything changed, and he became convinced that 'the rediscovery of religion is the great intellectual, moral and spiritual adventure of our time'.²

However, though his search for God had begun, he did not consider himself a Christian either then or when he went up to Magdalen College, Oxford, as an Exhibitioner. Here he met Martyn Skinner and Hugh Waterman, who were to become lifelong friends. The three did everything together, sharing their idealism, their socialism, their love of literature and nature and, perhaps most importantly, their hatred of modern civilization. In their dedication to the simple life they were ahead of their time, for in 1930, when



they had all come down from Oxford, they tried to live out their ideals in a small cottage in Eastington in the Cotswolds – an experiment which all three came to regard as ‘the decisive event of all our lives’.³

While at Oxford, Alan had changed from reading Classics to reading English Literature, thus acquiring C. S. Lewis as his tutor. The two became great friends, both becoming Christians at about the same time, Lewis referring to Alan as ‘his chief companion on this stage of the road’.⁴ But after the breakup of the Eastington community Alan did not know what he wanted to do with his life; all he knew was that he must continue his spiritual search. The next two years were filled with pain as he spent long nights in prayer, read extensively and tried to decide whether or not to become a Roman Catholic – a hard decision in those days, when there was an emotional and often unthinking prejudice against Catholicism and his mother had told him that nothing would give her greater pain than that someone she loved should become a Roman Catholic.

Nevertheless become a Roman Catholic he did, and within weeks of his reception he went to Prinknash Priory (now Prinknash Abbey), a community of Benedictine monks in Gloucestershire, and in 1933 he was clothed as a novice and given the name of Bede. He was to spend the next fifteen years there, coming to be regarded as a man of deep prayer, a natural leader, even a possible abbot. Indeed C.S. Lewis remarked, more than once, that Bede was ‘a wonderful advertisement for the monastic life’.

In 1947 Bede became Superior of a new foundation at Farnborough, but though he started in high optimism, saying he had never been so happy in his life, it was not long before his dreams were shattered and after four years he was abruptly dismissed and sent to Pluscarden Abbey, the most northerly Benedictine abbey in the world. The official reason given was that Bede did not have the necessary administrative experience, but the real difficulties lay deeper, in his attitude to authority, in his relationship with his abbot, who wanted Farnborough and Pluscarden to be clones of Prinknash and, ironically, in Bede’s very success. His personal charm and his ability to communicate his faith was leading to a personality cult developing round him and jokes were made, only half-affectionately, at what his fellow monks called his ‘apostolate of the parlour’.

While at Pluscarden he wrote his autobiography *The Golden String*, an immediate bestseller which, nearly half a century later, is



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still in print. Though the book goes only as far as his early years at Prinknash, he was already being drawn to Eastern religions, considering that 'from a Christian point of view the importance of Indian philosophy can hardly be over-estimated'.⁵ Indeed his interest in Eastern religion was such that he could not resist an invitation from an Indian Benedictine monk to go to India and help in founding a Benedictine monastery there. The Abbot gave him permission to accept and in 1955, aged 49, Bede left for India. He needed, he wrote to a friend, to 'find the other half of my soul'. For the first two years Bede lived in a small monastery outside Bangalore, but it was not possible to get the necessary permissions from Rome to make the intended foundation, so he joined up with a Belgian Cistercian monk, Francis Mahieu, and together the two monks settled at Kurisumala Ashram in the mountains of Kerala in South India.

In embarking on this monastic experiment, Bede and Father Francis were attempting a delicate balance, travelling in virtually uncharted territory as they simultaneously lived a Cistercian interpretation of the Benedictine Rule, practised the liturgy of the Syrian Church (canonically, Kurisumala Ashram is an Eastern monastery under a Syrian Bishop) and honoured the ancient tradition of the Indian sannyasi. For instance, at Bangalore Bede had worn shoes and the white robes of the Benedictine, and used chairs and tables; now they went barefoot, wore the kavi, the saffron-coloured robes of the sannyasis, ate strictly vegetarian food with their hands, and sat and slept on mats.

By the 1960s Bede was becoming increasingly well known, largely through his writings – in fact Father Francis considered that he was becoming an international figure – and in 1963 he was invited to America, where he was honoured for his work on the ecumenical approach to non-Christian cultures. During this trip he gave lectures in New Mexico, at an East–West Dialogue meeting, and in New York. Just as he had gone to India seeking the other half of his soul, so he now felt that America and India represented two halves of the world and that he had to bring them together in himself by coming to terms with everything that America represented.

Bede remained in Kerala for ten years, during which time the community grew from two monks and two postulants living in a palm leaf hut to a thriving community of twenty monks, living in a stone house and running a successful dairy farm. But all was not well between Bede and Father Francis. 'I loved Father Bede and respected



him,' said Father Francis, 'but I could not agree in meetings and I expressed my disagreement.' These disagreements were made even harder to reconcile by the younger monks' tendency to play the two men off against each other. Father Francis admitted, 'When I took a decision, you see, some of the monks would go to him and he would allow things which I would not allow . . . He could not but be a head, by nature he was a leader . . . people had great reverence for him and they went to him naturally.'⁶ There is no evidence of jealousy between the two men; it was simply the common problem of authority when two strong-minded and talented people try to work closely together. In 1965 Father Francis warned Bede that 'a body with two heads is not healthy' and two years later he issued an ultimatum. He was going to take a sabbatical year and leave Bede in charge. If, when he returned, Bede wished to remain, then he would go somewhere else. If he wished to leave, then he, Father Francis, would remain. He returned to find that Bede had decided to go back to Prinknash, but before he had even written to England fate intervened. Abhishiktananda, the French monk originally known as Father Henri le Saux, had decided to retire to the Himalayas and had asked Father Francis to take over his ashram in Tamil Nadu. Father Francis persuaded Bede to go, and thus started the longest and most significant period of Bede's life – his twenty-five years in Shantivanam.

Shantivanam, which means 'Forest of Peace', was where Father Henri le Saux, together with another Frenchman, Father Jules Monchanin, had pioneered the dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity. It was one of the early Christian ashrams and they called it Saccidananda Ashram, the Hindu name for the Godhead, from the Sanskrit words *sat*, 'being', *cit*, 'awareness', *ananda*, 'bliss', the implicit message being that the Hindu quest for God, enshrined in this ancient word, finds a parallel in the Christian Trinity. Bede's delight at being there knew no bounds; he wrote to his abbot that 'It seems like the culmination of my pilgrimage'.⁷

Far from being the end of his journey Bede was embarking on the most challenging period of his life and, despite his initial optimism, his early years at Shantivanam were not easy. The two monks who came with him from Kerala left; another came, but only stayed six months. There were times when there were no brothers or postulants at all, though a few visitors were beginning to come. He was not well physically, admitting to Martyn Skinner that he felt 'desperately weak and hoping that if he had to die he could die in the quiet of his



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own cell with the door open to the sound of birds and insects'.⁸ He was facing enormous difficulties at the ashram and was also deeply depressed. But his strength lay in his way of dealing with his depression. 'More than once I have surrendered the whole thing,' he later admitted. 'That's the secret. If you really renounce somehow it comes itself.'⁹ Lonely, depressed and unwell, he was becoming increasingly tolerant and gentle.

Things improved with the arrival, around 1970, of two monks from Kurisumala, Christudas and Amaldas. They became devoted to Bede and a small community began to grow. It was partly to guard the status of the community and to protect its members that Bede felt the need to affiliate himself with a monastic community, so in 1980, after much thought, he became a member of the Camaldolese Congregation, the ashram itself following two years later.

Through the 1970s the number of visitors grew steadily. Shantivanam was becoming famous and Bede was regarded as a holy man; indeed he was being seen as a sort of international guru. But if it was a time of crowning achievement and recognition it was also a time of trial, for Bede's fame brought controversy and some of his opponents did not hesitate to speak out. There was the one-time manager of the ashram who circulated 'firsthand' stories of immorality, and the journalist who suggested that because Bede had 'a white skin and plenty of money' he could do what he liked. More seriously, criticism came from inside the Church, when the Bishop of Tiruchi objected to the way Bede was Indianizing the liturgy, failing to appreciate that everything Bede was doing had been approved by the All-India Seminar. He also came into conflict with a Hindu fundamentalist – a correspondence of such acrimony that it is hard to understand why Bede engaged in the dialogue at all.

Shantivanam was drawing people of all religions and of none, of all nationalities and all ages. The needs of people yearning to find God, but unable to feel at home in their traditional religions, were being met by this extraordinary man and they responded in their thousands. It was also a time when Bede travelled around much of the world, attracting large audiences in Europe, America and Australia. The most important event of these last years was not, however, any outer event, but a stroke which he suffered in 1990, and as a result of which he claimed he grew more in two years than in the previous eighty-four. He called it his advaitic experience, *advaita* being the Sanskrit word for non-duality. It was also a



breakthrough to the feminine, for this patriarchal, intellectual man had now found that 'God is not simply in the light, in the intelligible world, in the rational order. God is in the darkness, in the womb, in the Mother, in the chaos from which the order comes'.¹⁰ The opposites in him were reconciled and his whole being changed: he was grounded in a way that was quite unfamiliar to him. He who had lived so much in the head was now, using the language of the chakras, talking of his energy moving down from the head to the heart, then down to the muladhara, the body's connection to the earth and to sex: the inhibitions which had constrained him all his life were gone and he became a full human being. On the one hand his flashes of irritability were less controlled on the other he became more and more loving and able to show that love. He had also reached, at last, the culminating vision of his life, the point to which, both consciously and unconsciously, his entire life had been leading. In the last months of his life he could speak only of love; love was his entire universe, the central experience of his consciousness. By the time he died, on 13 May 1993, there was no doubt in the minds of those who mourned him that they had known a man of great holiness.

The major themes and ideas in Bede's thinking

Though Bede Griffiths was referred to as a 'Scholar-Monk' and 'the supremely intellectual Oxford academic', he did not talk in the language of academic theology. His contribution to the twentieth century lay in his vision, in his understanding of the times in which he lived, and in his own life and personal holiness. His thought and his major ideas are best seen in the context of his desire for experience, running through his life from his initial experience of God in nature as a schoolboy to the great experience which accompanied his stroke two years before his death. He never ceased to use his first-class mind – indeed had he wished he could have taken the academic path – but what he sought, valued and eventually gained was experience. It was not a self-centred desire: he once wrote, 'From the earliest time I can remember I have always had the conviction that what I was experiencing was being given not for me alone but for others, in a sense for humanity'.¹¹



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THE OPPOSITES

More than most people, Bede Griffiths was torn apart by the opposites. We all live in duality, but for him the tension between the opposites was something he rarely escaped, either in his own complex personality or in that unifying vision which was central to his thinking and lay behind much of what he achieved. The one universal reality that lies beyond the opposites was the goal of his journey – he once claimed that it should be the goal of everyone's journey.

His concern with the opposites was both personal and theoretical. His interest began in the 1940s, when he came across the thinking of C.G. Jung; then, a little later, he was drawn to the idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum* posited in the fifteenth century by the German cardinal and philosopher Nicholas de Cusa. He was attracted especially by de Cusa's conviction that the road to truth lay beyond reason and contradiction and that God, in whom all opposites meet, can only be discovered through intuition. De Cusa's emphasis on the one reality beyond the opposites was balm to Bede's soul, for at the time he did not find many people sympathetic, or even particularly interested, in his way of thinking.

It was indeed Bede's concern with the resolution of the opposites which took him to India, as he showed when he wrote of his need to find the other half of his soul.

I had begun to find that there was something lacking not only in the Western world but in the Western Church. We were living from one half of our soul, from the conscious, rational level and we needed to discover the other half, the unconscious, intuitive dimension. I wanted to experience in my life the marriage of these two dimensions of human existence, the rational and intuitive, the conscious and unconscious, the masculine and feminine. I wanted to find the way to the marriage of East and West.¹²

Here, in the marriage of East and West, the work for which Bede Griffiths is best known, the opposites meet head-on; and in particular they meet in the concept of the Christian ashram. What are the particular opposites that the Christian ashram has to reconcile? Clearly any Christian community is centred on Christ, while in ashramic life disciples gather round a guru in their search for God. A monastery has an institutional framework and is based



on a Rule, while an ashram is more a way of life than an institution. Monastic life centres on the liturgy and *lectio divina*; the ashram gives central place to contemplative prayer. Though there are exceptions, Western monasticism normally takes the form of community life, its members living in one place. In India great stress is laid on the solitary life, the Hindu sannyasin often wandering from place to place, unburdened by possessions, food or money. St Benedict attached great importance to withdrawal from the world and, though of course Benedictines are rightly famed for their hospitality, their houses are single-sexed, while an ashram is essentially an open community, receiving men and women without distinction.

The opposites are full of potential. Just as the opposites of male and female produce the next generation, so the marriage of any pair of opposites can bring new life. Bede's success in reconciling the differences between an ashram and a monastery can be seen in Shantivanam's harmonious lifestyle, with its curious mix of Western Benedictine life in the context of the customs and traditions of Tamil Nadu; it is evident too in the power and beauty of the liturgy, which is a fusion of old and new, traditional and modern, East and West. This lifestyle and this liturgy are children of the marriage of East and West, but it is not an easy marriage. The Christian ashram is a relatively new idea, and its theology is still being worked out. When the curtains of the outer differences of the opposites of East and West are drawn back, complex and important issues are revealed, such as the question of time, the concept of a personal as opposed to an impersonal God and the balance between transcendence and immanence.

TIME AND GOD

East and West hold different concepts of time. The Hebrew revelation brought a linear concept of time, progressing towards an end, an eschaton; then Jesus comes in the context of this historical, linear time – an unrepeatable event bringing history to fulfilment in time and place. The Eastern concept of time, on the other hand, is cyclic; as in nature, everything goes in circles – the sun rises and sets, the moon waxes and wanes, spring, summer, autumn and winter give way to each other: to attain liberation is to escape



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from the wheel of time. Bede was convinced that the meeting of these two aspects of the different traditions, which has long preoccupied theologians in India, was crucial to an understanding between East and West. He argued that neither East nor West had the whole truth: the danger of Hinduism was its tendency to see time and history as a passing phenomenon without any ultimate significance, while Christianity tends to attach too much importance to temporal events and to lose the sense of a timeless reality. He felt on the one hand that Hinduism is wrong in thinking that Jesus could simply be taken into its cyclic world, ignoring the significance of the resurrection; on the other that the West had placed salvation too firmly in time, not sufficiently aware that 'the eternal reality is always there'. He suggested that the key might be seen in the spiral, which goes round in circles but is moving towards a point.

One of the most significant consequences of these differing concepts of time is that they lead to a different understanding of God. On the one hand, the Semitic experience is of a transcendent, personal God, revealed in a particular way: God dwells in heaven and looks down on earth. On the other hand, the oriental experience is of immanence – God is perceived as being not so much above the universe as in it. The non-dual reality is present in the whole of creation as Brahman and in the heart of every person as Atman, the Self. Finally, Brahman is revealed as Ishwara, the personal creator God, known in the Upanishads as 'the Lord of the past and the future'.

Where is the meeting point between these two approaches? Christians of course can and do see God as immanent in nature, but the emphasis is different. The Judaeo-Christian tradition starts from transcendence, then discovers immanence, while the Hindu tradition starts from immanence and reaches towards transcendence. How Ishwara, the personal God, is related to Brahman, the absolute Godhead, has long been a matter of debate inside Hinduism itself. This becomes even more complex in the light of the Trinitarian faith of Christians. However, Bede came to agree with his friend Raimon Panikkar in thinking that the Trinity can be a doorway to understanding rather than an obstacle; that it may be regarded as a junction where the authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet. He argued that Greek theology tended to divide Christ by conceiving him in terms of a human and divine nature; he was drawn more to the understanding of people like the Blessed John



Ruysbroek, one of his favourite Christian mystics. To share Ruysbroek's vision that the movement of the Trinity reflects the rhythm of the universe is to begin to close the gap between the Hindu and the Christian understanding of time. Writing in *A New Vision of Reality*, Bede said:

Everything comes forth eternally from the Father, the Ground of Being, in the Son, the Word and Wisdom of the Father and returns in the Spirit. The Father, the ground, is pouring itself out eternally in the Son, knowing itself and expressing itself in the Son, and the Father and the Son return to one another, unite with one another, eternally in the embrace of the Holy Spirit. We are all enfolded in that love.¹³

The relationship between Hinduism and Christianity was crucial to Bede's life and work and, by 1971, when he was 65, he felt that Eastern wisdom was the key to Christianity and found he could no longer conceive of Christ except in terms of Vedantic Hinduism. However, as a result of the advaitic experience which accompanied his stroke, he went further. For the last two years of his life what really concerned him was experiencing the one reality beyond the opposites.

FOUR STAGES IN BEDE'S DEVELOPMENT

It is possible to trace four stages in the development to this, the peak of his thinking, though like all such progressions they overlap and cannot be precisely dated. First was Bede's discovery of the love of Christ, so total that it led him to become a Benedictine monk. Then, in the 1930s, came the period when he began to discover other religions, though still in no doubt that, though all religions contain some elements of the truth, 'there is only one absolutely true religion ... Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life and without him no man comes to the Father'. By 1973 he believed this statement needed qualifying:

Christ is the ultimate fulfilment of all religion, the final and definitive word of God, but the same cannot be said of Christianity. Christianity, as an organised religion seeking to express the mystery of Christ, the divine Word, in human terms, suffers from the same defects as other religions.¹⁴

Two years later he went further, writing: 'I am so tired of the childish pretence that Christianity is the only true religion and must



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be shown to be superior to others'.¹⁵ He was moving gradually to the third stage, a conviction that all religions are complementary:

Saivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism, and the different schools of Vedanta in Hinduism; Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism, with their different schools; the Sunni and Shia sects in Islam, and their different schools of philosophy; Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Protestantism within Christianity, with their different expressions of the one Truth of revelation, each with its particular insight. But one must learn to discern among these conflicting and partial views the principle which unites them, which transcends these differences and reconciles their conflicts.¹⁶

Then, in the early 1980s, came a glimmering of the final stage, the idea that there is one reality beyond all, a reality found in all religions: Bede was becoming more and more interested in the advaitic experience. Much ink has been spilt in defining the word *advaita*, but it would be hard to improve on Abhishiktananda's definition for clarity and brevity: 'Advaita means precisely this: neither God alone, nor the creature alone, nor God plus the creature, but an indefinable non-duality which transcends at once all separation and all confusion'.¹⁷ While the word comes from the Vedas, there can also be a Christian *advaita*: 'in reality, advaita is already present at the root of Christian experience. It is simply the mystery that God and the world are not two'.¹⁸

It seems to me that we have ultimately to go beyond all forms of thought – even beyond the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Church etc. All these belong to the world of 'signs' – manifestations of God in human thought – but God himself, Truth itself, is beyond all forms of thought. All meditation should lead into silence, into the world of 'non-duality', when all the differences – and conflicts – in this world are transcended – not that they are simply annulled, but that they are taken up into a deeper unity of being in which all conflicts are resolved – rather like colours being absorbed into pure white light, which contains all the colours but resolves their differences.¹⁹

Bede was working in the field of inculturation, the term adopted after the Second Vatican Council for a theology which tries to share the whole cultural tradition of a people and to be a way to approach a multicultural church. This inevitably led him into the whole question of symbolism, outwardly evident in Shantivanam, the chapel and its furnishings, just as inwardly it permeated his thought.



Bede had long felt an urgent need to recover the meaning of symbols in every sphere of life, in politics as well as in religion:

The Shepherd, the King, water, wine ... these are deeply symbolic figures based on archetypal figures of the unconscious and therefore profoundly significant. Whereas modern figures like the President, the Probation Officer, Cornflakes etc, have been emptied of all symbolic meaning.²⁰

Bede was profoundly aware that primitive thought is intuitive and grasps the whole, whereas the rational mind, coming later, distinguishes and separates. He was influenced by Karl Rahner, who argued that the symbol is the reality, and, perhaps most of all, by the Maritains, who contended that the symbol is a catalyst to the experience of a mystery that goes beyond understanding, that it can lead to the depth of the experience which it expresses. Bede believed that every word is a symbol, the sacraments and the dogmas of the Church such as the Trinity, the Incarnation and even – an area which led him into painful controversy – the Eucharist. They ‘do not define the mystery properly speaking, they only express in human terms what he (God) has chosen to reveal concerning himself’, and are ‘nothing but signs and instruments by which the divine mystery is manifested to mankind’.²¹

A final and crucial element of Bede’s thinking lay in his lifelong sympathy with the perennial philosophy and he would quote Cardinal Newman, saying that ‘there is something true and divinely revealed in all religions all over the earth’.²² At the heart of the perennial philosophy is the contention that the perception of reality revealed in mystical experience is the same for all human beings; that through the symbols of different religions it is one reality that is perceived, independent of culture and faith. Bede largely agreed with the assumption behind the perennial philosophy that all religious and mystical experiences are essentially the same.

An analysis of Bede’s influence

Bede Griffiths had a great influence, especially on Westerners who do not feel at home in Christian churches. This influence, which continues to grow through his writings, falls into four main categories: in his attitude to the Church, in the importance he gave



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to dialogue, in his attitude to meditation, and in his openness to new thinking.

Bede loved the Church, but he had long been aware of its shortcomings and daily he met people who were leaving it, or at the least ignoring official teachings they could no longer accept. He often agreed with them, disliking the repetition of outworn formulas and feeling that the best way to defend the Church was to show how old truths can be translated into contemporary language. He endeared himself to many who shared his feelings by his encouragement of liturgical innovation, by supporting a married priesthood and the ordination of women and by his surprisingly outspoken views on the nature of the papacy. He argued that the medieval conception of the papacy is today fatally flawed and that its 'inordinate claims' must be squarely faced. With an impressive command of historical detail he would point out the times the magisterium had been proved wrong, writing that there could be no hope of Christian reunion 'until the Roman Church publicly acknowledges its past errors and admits that it does not have the answer to all the difficult problems of sexual morality and other matters which trouble humanity today'.²³

From his early days at Shantivanam, Bede wanted to establish an intellectual tradition there, to make it a research centre and a centre of dialogue. To this end he put a lot of energy into building up the library and arranging meetings and conferences. How then did he see this process of dialogue? Bede expressed his position with characteristic clarity. He was in no doubt that to enter into dialogue it is essential to be faithful to your own tradition; he considered dialogue and mission to be indivisible and that the missionaries were gravely mistaken in thinking they could preach the Gospel and receive nothing themselves. Bede would start a dialogue meeting by reading a paper on a subject of universal concern such as salvation; he would then encourage everyone, academic or not, to ask themselves what salvation meant to them as a Hindu, a Christian – simply as a person. In that way the discussion could come to life, as people spoke from experience as well as theory.

Bede was always aware that syncretism can thread its way through the tapestry of dialogue, and was mindful of the dangers of a superficial syncretism that regarded all religions as essentially the same, differing only in accidental characteristics, an attitude he considered destroyed all serious dialogue and made real understanding



impossible. He held to the fact that for a Christian the mystery is disclosed in Christ, for a Buddhist in the Buddha, for a Hindu in the Vedas and for a Muslim in the Koran – each has its own unique insights, and the point of dialogue is to share these insights and to see their relationship to the whole. Nothing of the essential truth of each religious tradition must be lost.

We are not seeking a syncretism in which each religion will lose its own individuality, but an organic growth in which each religion has to purify itself and discover its own inmost depth and significance and then relate itself to the inner depth of the other traditions. Perhaps it will never be achieved in this world, but it is the one way in which we can advance today towards that unity in truth which is the ultimate goal of mankind.²⁴

An important aspect of Bede's influence, in some ways the most important, was the emphasis he placed on meditation; his dawn and dusk hours of meditation were the pillars of his day, the firm rock on which his life was based. In his time at Prinknash, Farnborough and Pluscarden he had valued the meditative reading of the Scriptures and the Fathers, saying that the Mass and the breviary was a perfect method of prayer and contemplation, but increasingly he had come to find that this was not sufficient, and that in Western Christianity the idea of contemplation, of a direct experience of God in prayer, had been obscured by the emphasis on philosophy and theology. He was also saddened that so little attention was paid to the position of the body in contemplative prayer and, though he regarded technique as simply a vehicle which has to be transcended, that so few Catholics taught methods of contemplative prayer.

If he was asked his advice on how to meditate he would teach the method using the repetition of a mantra rediscovered by John Main. He himself mostly used the Jesus Prayer, which became so deep in him that he found it went on all the time when his mind was not otherwise occupied. He would encourage everyone to meditate, and towards the end of his life he was planning ways to encourage a renewal of contemplative life. No meeting held today in Bede's memory would be complete without at least one period of meditation. Indeed he once said to a friend seeking his guidance, 'There's really only one bit of advice I can give you – meditate'.

There was never any doubt that Bede Griffiths was a Christian and that the centre of his life was Christ, and perhaps his single



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greatest contribution to twentieth-century spirituality lay in his ability to make Christianity acceptable to people who had wandered far from the embrace of the Church. Though it is misleading to associate him with that vague umbrella term 'The New Age', which includes so much he did not stand for, he was convinced that a new age of spirituality was dawning. He was always open to new thinking, whether it was the Tarot, Transpersonal Psychology, the New Science and its relationship to religion, or Dzog Chen, a branch of Tibetan Buddhism that eluded him until old age. In his support of women priests and voluntary celibacy, in his views on marriage of East and West and the meeting of science and religion, much of what he said was prophetic, and if not ahead of his time he was certainly at its cutting edge. He was one of the great spiritual leaders of the twentieth century, as the *National Catholic Reporter* recognized when it wrote that 'Even at age 86 and on the edge of death Bede Griffiths was still running so far ahead of the pack that his life's momentum will quicken him for many springs to come'.²⁵

Notes

1. J. Swindells (ed.) (1993), *A Human Search, Bede Griffiths Reflects on His Life: An Oral History* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books), p. 5. Based on a film documentary of the same title.
2. Bede Griffiths (1954), *The Golden String* (London: Harvill Press), pp. 13–14.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
4. C.S. Lewis (1977), *Surprised by Joy* (London: Collins, Fount Paperbacks), p. 187.
5. Griffiths, *The Golden String*, p. 171.
6. Francis Mahieu, interview with Shirley du Boulay, January 1995.
7. Letter from Bede Griffiths to Abbot Dyfrig Rushton, 11 November 1968.
8. Letter from Martyn Skinner to Hugh Waterman, 17 April 1970.
9. Letter from Bede Griffiths to Martyn Skinner, 22 June 1982.
10. Swindells, *A Human Search*, p. 89.
11. Letter from Bede Griffiths to Judson Trapnell, 31 May 1988, quoted in J. Trapnell (1993), *Bede Griffiths' Theory of Religious Symbol and Practice of Dialogue: Towards Interreligious Understanding* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Michigan: the Catholic University of America).
12. Bede Griffiths (1982), *The Marriage of East and West* (London: Collins, Fount Paperbacks), p. 8.



13. Bede Griffiths (1989), *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith* (London: Collins), p. 251.
14. Bede Griffiths (1973), 'Erroneous beliefs and unauthorized rites', *The Tablet*, 14 April, p. 356.
15. Letter from Bede Griffiths to Father Michael Hanbury, 23 September 1975.
16. Bede Griffiths (1976), *Return to the Centre* (London: Collins), p. 107.
17. Abhishiktananda (1969), *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart* (Delhi: ISPCK), p. 98.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
19. Letter from Bede Griffiths to Nigel Bruce, 21 August 1981.
20. Letter from Bede Griffiths to Martyn Skinner, 20 June 1967.
21. Griffiths, *The Golden String*, p. 186.
22. Cardinal J.H. Newman (1833), *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (London: publisher unknown).
23. Bede Griffiths, Letter to *The Tablet* (17 January 1987), p. 317.
24. Bede Griffiths, 'The one mystery', *The Tablet* (9 March 1974), p. 223.
25. *National Catholic Reporter* (21 May 1993).



4. Thomas Merton

Monk for the contemporary world

Danny Sullivan

The wanderer

In Jim Forest's fine biography of Thomas Merton, *Living with Wisdom*, he introduces Merton to the reader with the quotation from Merton himself that:

if you want to identify me,
ask not where I live,
or what I like to eat,
or how I comb my hair,
but ask me what I am living for,
in detail,
and ask me what I think
is keeping me from living fully
for the thing I want to live for.¹

This, in a sense, was typical of Merton, who refused to be boxed in or stereotyped in a way that people like monks and nuns have been and often still are. Thomas Merton was born in 1915 and died in 1968. Yet over thirty years later at the beginning of a new millennium all his books are still in print, and two societies – The International Thomas Merton Society based in America and The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland based in Britain – continue to explore the range of his writings and insights in a contemporary context. To understand why this is so it is important to appreciate Merton's own life journey which led him via France and England to a Trappist monastery in Kentucky and ultimately to a gathering of monastics in Asia where he died in a tragic accident.

Merton was born on 31 January 1915 in Prades, a small town in the French Pyrenees. His mother Ruth was an American by birth and



his father Owen was from New Zealand. They had met in Paris where they were both art students. By 1916, because of the war, the Mertons were in America, and living close to Ruth's parents. Owen continued to paint and his reputation as an artist continued to grow, albeit bringing in very little income for the family.

Thomas Merton's relationship with his mother is key to an understanding of the adult he became. Ruth Merton died when her son was 6 years old and she said farewell to him in a letter from her hospital bed. Merton himself recalls his mother as cold and full of expectations of him – expectations which he often felt he failed to live up to in any reassuring way. By comparison, his brother John Paul, born in 1918, seemed much more placid, calm and acceptable. In his famous autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton writes:

Mother wanted me to be independent, and not to run with the herd. I was to be original, individual; I was to have a definite character and ideals of my own. I was not to be an article thrown together, on the common bourgeois pattern, on everybody else's assembly line.²

It was only towards the end of his life that Merton was able to reconcile his feminine side and to have a deeper perspective on the influence of his mother on his life.

Owen Merton, a talented yet struggling artist, was confronted with the challenge of making a living and bringing up two young sons. Notwithstanding support from Ruth's parents, he led a life of travel, often with Tom in tow. During this period Thomas lived in America and again in France, where his experience of the French schooling system was not a happy one. But he was content to be with his father whom he admired and was deeply fond of, seeing in him a person of religious insight and understanding.

By 1928 Merton was living in England with his father and became a pupil at Oakham School, which he described as an 'obscure but decent little school in the Midlands'. Owen was in hospital in London suffering from a brain tumour, and once again Merton had to confront an experience of real and deep loss. The death of his father in 1931 when he was 16 was a great blow to Merton, the experience of his father's dying and death perhaps confirming in him his struggle against accepting a belief in God.

Merton remained in England and was placed under the care of a guardian, Tom Bennett, who was increasingly challenged by this



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young man determined to flex his adolescent muscles. They crossed swords not a few times, though Bennett also nurtured in Merton an awareness of the wider, cultural world and in particular that of literature. Bennett perhaps had hopes of Merton making it to the diplomatic service. Merton's arrival at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1933 must have made his guardian confident that perhaps his hopes for Merton's future were well founded. Yet Merton lasted only a year at Cambridge, and for the rest of his life never really reconciled himself to his time there, being his own harshest judge of his experiences and activities.

The reality is that Merton led a fairly dissipated student life at Cambridge, drinking and womanizing to a considerable extent. This culminated in him fathering a child, and Bennett had legally to extricate him from the situation. Nothing is known of the mother and child, though both were rumoured to have been killed during the blitz over Britain in the Second World War. Yet as Jim Forest points out in *Living with Wisdom*, Merton still believed they were alive in early 1944 and made provision for his child in his monastic will should this child ever be contacted.³

This incident of fathering a child was the last straw for Merton's guardian, and when Merton was in America with his grandparents in the summer of 1934 Bennett wrote suggesting he did not return to England. Alongside the fathering of a child were Merton's poor exam results and the probable loss of his scholarship. Merton accepted the situation, and the 19-year-old nomad enrolled as a student at Columbia University in New York. He did not become a changed person or serious student overnight, but at Columbia Merton did at last find a sense of identity, and lifetime friends and tutors who impressed and inspired him.

Merton had been subject to religious influences throughout his life. His father was religious, and in his last days was etching portraits which Merton saw as icons. A French Catholic family Merton once knew impressed him by their faith and piety, even though he had been warned of the dangers of Catholicism. On a trip to Rome, the beauty of the churches and of some mosaics stunned him in particular. Although in his early days at Columbia he flirted with communism, Merton continued his own religious search and exploration. Dan Walsh, one of his tutors and a Roman Catholic, made a particular impression and was to be influential in Merton's finally seeking entry to a Trappist monastery.



However, it was also at Columbia that Merton's talent as a writer was further nurtured and developed. He became fully involved in *Jester*, a student publication, and together with his friends wrote frequently and discussed the great novel he thought he would one day produce. Modesty was not a prerequisite for the editorial board of *Jester*.

Merton became increasingly impressed with the poetry of William Blake, was beginning to read Catholic theologians, and was influenced by his meeting with the Hindu monk Bramachari, who was visiting New York on his way to the Congress of Religions at the World's Fair in Chicago. It was Bramachari who suggested to Merton that if he was interested in the mystical way he should read Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ*. Finally, in 1938, Merton took the step he had been reflecting on for so long, and was baptized and received into the Roman Catholic Church. This nomad and seeker of the truth had his baptism witnessed by four of his Columbia friends, three of them Jewish, recognition already that, despite the rootlessness of his life so far, his diverse experiences had instilled in him an inherent openness to and respect for the integrity of others, their beliefs and values.

Merton deepened his religious awareness from this point on. He was among the teaching staff at a Franciscan College, thought of joining the order, but was thoroughly disheartened by the reaction to his honesty about fathering a child. He spent time working in Harlem and wrote with passion and insight about the undervaluing and under-utilization of the gifts of black Americans. Knowing that he was pursuing thoughts of the priesthood despite the reaction from the Franciscans, his tutor and now friend Dan Walsh suggested he go on retreat to the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. This Merton did, and it led to the eventual acceptance of him as a postulant choir monk on 13 December 1941. At the age of 26 Merton travelled to the monastery to be with the community of monks who were to be his family for the second half of his life.

Monk, poet, writer and prophet

Merton entered into the life as a postulant at Gethsemani with an enthusiasm not unusual in a recent convert. While he believed the monastery to be the centre of America, his Abbot Dominic Dunne had the wisdom to discern he had a writer on his hands, and



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encouraged Merton to continue to write. This Merton did, and one of his finest poems, written in memory of his brother John Paul killed in action in 1943, came from this period. In 1948, Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published, and was a sensation both in America and around the world. The response to this tale of a religious pilgrim and nomad who found himself in a monastery received an overwhelming response from readers, not a few of whom found their way to knocking on monastery doors seeking acceptance. This theme of the pilgrim, the 'sinner' who finds his way 'home', resonated with the feelings and experiences of Americans trying to make sense of their world and their lives after Pearl Harbor and Auschwitz. The book was considered important enough to merit an introduction by Graham Greene in the British edition.

The Abbot encouraged Merton to continue writing, which he did, sometimes at some cost to himself. He struggled with the tension of being a monk and a writer, though he was, throughout his monastic life, faithful to the duties and rhythms of the monastic day. His output simply reflected an astonishing capacity to read and then write in a completely focused and disciplined way. Merton's early books following his autobiography related to the spiritual life and often to the mystical path, but they gradually began to recognize that this mystical way was open to all men and women and was not exclusive to monks and nuns. This is another theme to be found in Merton's writings: that all people have the potential to be contemplatives and, out of meditation and contemplation, find a love and compassion for their fellow human beings. In 1958 Merton himself had a profound and enlightening experience in the town of Louisville, where he looked upon the men and women around him and recognized them as his sisters and brothers to the point that 'it was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness'. This was a wiser, more mature and humble Merton who was never again to claim anything special for himself or his own particular vocation.

While some scholars may argue about whether Merton went to the monastery as an escape from what he himself described as his dissolute past, there is no doubt that he brought into the monastery from deep within himself those experiences that had opened him to people of other faiths and traditions, as well as those that had given



him a sharp sense of social justice rooted in a clear Christian theology. In time his writings began to reflect this as, despite being a contemplative monk, he was well informed of world events through contacts with publishers (some of whom were old friends) and the volumes of correspondence he received in response to his books. This monk, faithful to his daily call, was writing books, corresponding with writers and poets of his day, writing to complete strangers and keeping a daily journal. The price at times was emotional and physical stress, but never enough to stop him writing.

Henry Miller once referred to Merton as the most important American writer of the twentieth century. This may be for others to debate, but what is interesting to note is the prophetic theme that begins to appear in his writings about peace and social justice issues. These writings were not well received by some, especially those traditional Roman Catholics who wanted Merton to remain frozen in the time of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. What was he doing speaking out against the Church on peace issues, the government in relation to Vietnam, the Cold War and racial issues? And how could he challenge a modern American technological society, which he saw as alienating the spirit, imagination and creativity of the individual as well as threatening the sense of global family?

All this Merton did out of his silence. Increasingly feeling a call to greater solitude and silence and away from the overcrowded and busy monastery (which his writings had partly caused), he reintroduced the Trappist Order to the vocation of the hermit. At times he toyed with the idea of joining a more strictly enclosed community where the vocation of the hermit was understood and allowed, but this exploration in itself caused his abbots to give him some leeway in finding the space for a more solitary life. Perhaps it was this space and solitude which gave rise to the powerful and radical challenges in his writings in the 1960s. So powerful was his writing on peace issues that his religious superiors in Rome eventually banned him from publishing further on this topic. By this time the discerning monk was alert to what this meant, and Merton accepted the ban. However, he proceeded to continue to write letters to friends on peace issues, saying he had no objection to them passing the letters on. These letters became famous in their own right and were eventually published as *The Cold War Letters*.⁴

In the 1950s Merton hosted conferences at the monastery between ministers of different Christian traditions. He developed



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an understanding of the Christian Orthodox tradition and felt a desire to contribute towards a healing between Eastern and Western Christianity. He corresponded with Sufi scholars and Buddhists, and had a profound understanding of Zen Buddhism as exemplified in his book *Zen and The Birds of Appetite*.⁵ His introduction to that book shows a remarkably concise understanding of Zen. Thus Merton was at the forefront of interfaith as well as inter-Christian dialogue. He incorporated the fruits of these experiences and exchanges into his writing and into his crucial work with the formation of new monks in his role as novice master.

In the 1960s Merton was finally allowed his own hermitage. He was not what people would expect of a normal hermit. Friends and correspondents visited his hermitage, and he found time to talk with them, picnic and sometimes travel to Louisville to hear some jazz. He kept abreast of the times, listening to the music of the Beatles, Bob Dylan (whose lyrics impressed him) and receiving Joan Baez as a visitor. He continued to shock those readers of *The Seven Storey Mountain* who wanted to keep a plaster saint untouched by the world, and in 1966, while in hospital in Louisville, he met and fell in love with a nurse named Marge – a woman much younger than himself. This love is chronicled in a series of privately published poems and in Volume 6 of his private journals entitled *Learning to Love*.⁶ Although Merton chose to remain a monk and the affair ended, he did not want this event in his life to be hidden, for it became for him a resolution of that pain he felt from the mother he always thought he had disappointed. In Marge he found someone who was willing to love him unconditionally and who gently nurtured his feminine nature. For Merton this experience integrated much of his life and writings into a coherent theme. For him the joy of being human was rooted in a profound understanding of a Christianity and a God that were full of wisdom and compassion.

Two years later Merton was allowed to travel to Asia to speak at a conference of monastics from around the world. He revelled in the freedom this gave him while retaining his disciplined life of prayer and meditation. He delighted in the world of Buddhist history, overwhelmed by the reclining statue of the Buddha in Polunawara. He had three fascinating encounters with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who said that it was only when he met Thomas Merton that he began to understand Christianity. In December 1968 Merton gave an address at the conference of monastics in Bangkok, retired to his



room, and died from electrocution while taking a shower. He was 53 years old. Jim Forest recounts the sum total of Merton's possessions when his body was returned to the monastery at Gethsemani:

- 1 Timex watch. Nil value.
- 1 pair of dark glasses. Nil value.
- 1 breviary. Nil value.
- 1 rosary. Nil value.
- 1 small icon. Nil value.

Merton, a voice for our times?

In the context of issues of spirituality and values in our contemporary world, perhaps the summary of Merton's possessions at the end of his life is a definitive statement. In a world oppressed by consumerism and individualism, he had nothing to offer but the insights and experiences which grew out of his silence and monastic life. This may be one reason why his writings remain in print to this day. The wisdom borne out of his silence speaks for all times to the women and men who can hear it.

Merton remains a significant influence on Christian monasticism both through his life and writings and through the novices he was responsible for and who went on to hold significant positions in their communities. He understood the tradition and history of monasticism, but recognized that it had to be interpreted in a contemporary context. His radical and refreshing openness meant that he found allies where others would not dare to look. Thus he once commented that the authentic hippy and the monk shared the same vocation, which was to sit on the edge of society and be critical. He did not come to this view in some smug, arrogant way but through a perception that there was much in the world, society and the Church that needed to be thoroughly questioned and challenged.

Merton did a great deal to reintroduce the Trappist Order to the vocation of the hermit, even if he was an idiosyncratic one himself. Again, this influence spread far beyond the Order and the Church itself. What he had to say about the solitary way spoke to women and men of all walks of life and garnered in people a way of life that was apparently meaningless, counter-cultural and yet powerfully attractive. One of the striking aspects of Merton's writings is that



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they very rarely lead the reader to him but instead cause the reader to explore ideas of God, spirituality, and a love and compassion for others.

Merton suffered the fate of all prophets in their own country. Fellow monks who were not impressed by his writings were angry at his involvement in issues of the day. Members of the Catholic Church wanted a plaster saint and not a mere monk who questioned the attitudes of the Church to the Russians, to peace and war or to racial issues. Merton was stubborn in his resistance, for he argued that it was the vocation of the monk to speak out of silence and, like the prophets of old, to be ready for abuse and disdain. In a brief but brilliant essay 'A devout meditation in memory of Adolf Eichmann' which appeared in his book *Raids on the Unspeakable*,⁷ Merton put forward the thesis that what was disturbing about Eichmann was not what he did but that he was found to be sane when doing it. He then skilfully takes the concept of sanity on the world's terms and says it is about as much use to women and men as are the ageing bones of the dinosaur. A sanity that is false and convenient is to be avoided. He shows how even Christianity has become sane as it blesses bombs and bomber planes but of course peace marchers are inevitably mad. In a chilling anticipation of what could have happened under Richard Nixon, he argues that if an American president pressed the nuclear button you could be sure that it was a 'sane' president who would have been elected to do it. This searing indictment of the arrogance and folly of men and women as gods remains as strikingly relevant today as it was when Merton first wrote it in 1966.

In July 1996, Christians and Buddhists gathered together at Merton's monastery in Gethsemani for dialogue and encounter.⁸ Almost thirty years after his death this gathering was a contemporary testament to his seminal influence on interfaith dialogue. Merton argued, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama does today, that to engage in authentic interfaith dialogue one has to have firm roots in and a deep understanding of one's own tradition. This does not preclude one from being critical of one's own faith tradition but that criticism itself comes from within its history and practice. People of other faith traditions would find that after one communication with Merton they were stunned at his level of awareness and understanding of their tradition. The Buddhists who met him in Asia always referred to him as a high lama. For his part, His Holiness the Dalai Lama when in America and anywhere near Gethsemani



Monastery will visit there and spend some time at Merton's grave. By coming to Catholic Christianity through agnosticism, Merton had a real sense of the pilgrim's path, and he recognized, respected and affirmed this in others with whom he met or communicated. He also understood that at the heart of every faith tradition is real mystery, and the experience of no experience and the language of no language.

Merton was not given to stereotyping. He refused to refer to the Russian people as Reds as so many Americans did, and he retained his position as a pacifist with integrity to the end of his life. His silencing by his own superiors was no accident, and not a few people saw the hand of the CIA in this move. The CIA did not know what to do with a contemplative monk who corresponded with and at times kept the company of pacifists, and those who burned draft cards like the Jesuit Berrigan brothers. When Merton met the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, he said, 'he is my brother'. Out of his meditation and contemplation Merton gained a sense of the suffering of the Vietnamese people, and was immediately at ease with Thich Nhat Hanh and all he stood for. To this day Thich Nhat Hanh has been exiled from his homeland for his pacifist stance, and Merton would have understood the pain of this. Merton was comfortable with pluralist views in an America where, if you did not conform to the state's involvement in the war, you were more or less communist. He was withering in his condemnation of his own Church's inability to appreciate its long, rich and noble theology of peace, and particularly the ease with which the American bishops toed the government line in the interests of being good Americans.

Here Merton speaks to the authentic rebel and the non-conformist. We are not meant to be automatons or robots in modern society but a people of hope and imagination with a compassion for our fellow brothers and sisters. Movements like the Shakers fascinated him, for he found in them a sense of what it is to be community, to be a human family. Through life in his hermitage he became deeply aware that he shared his world with other creatures such as deer and birds. He wrote about living in an 'ecological balance'. Merton anticipated with deep foresight some of the problems of the technological age. This was not a Luddite view but the perception of one who saw the dangers of promoting technology above the worth and joy of the human spirit. Merton resonated strongly with Herbert Marcuse's classic book *One Dimensional Man*,



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sharing Marcuse's concerns that the primacy of machines over men and women did not augur well for future generations. He would have been horrified but ultimately not surprised at the waging of modern technological wars broadcast on live television screens around the world. He would have recoiled at the obscenity of it.

What kept Merton's hopes and spirit alive in very difficult times? And life for him was often very difficult. Why does he still have something to say to a contemporary society, which in the West retains a deep desire for spiritual awareness and wholeness? Here perhaps we have to return to the notion of Merton's dual vocation, that of monk and writer. Much as there may have been times when Merton felt he wanted to abandon the writer and simply be the monk, the vast range of his writings which included books on the spiritual life, poetry, letters to a range of contemporary writers and figures, private journals and a range of articles for numerous magazines give the lie to that. The vocation of the writer in Merton kept him alert to what others were saying, and allowed him to test his own insights against theirs.

A good example of this is his brief but fascinating correspondence with Boris Pasternak, author of the much-acclaimed book *Doctor Zhivago*. Merton wrote to Pasternak and sent him a copy of his own work *Prometheus*. Because of the political constraints on him, Pasternak at first had to reply to Merton in a roundabout way, but eventually they were able to exchange letters up until Pasternak's death in 1960. Merton's friendship and correspondence reflected some of the prejudices he consistently met in his life because of his openness and respect for the work of others. The Abbot General refused to publish an article he wrote about Pasternak in 1958 entitled 'The Christian anarchist' on the grounds that novels are worldly things and dogs should not return to their own vomit. Yet these two writers living in the two major Cold War countries simply encouraged each other's work by their genuine and constructive criticism.

If you live in a world which you think has gone mad and if you believe that the religious order and community you belong to is equally capable of going mad at times through its constraining rules and regulations, then an enthusiasm and belief in the spirituality of great literature is one way to keep your spirit alive. For Merton this was certainly true as he struggled at times with the paradox of his vocation as monk and writer. He had a genuine love and affection



for his fellow monks, and indeed in Asia just before he died he wrote of the monastery as his one real home. However, he fought against its pettiness too, and despaired of its inability to keep some of its finest young men, who left frustrated by its apparent unwillingness to be alive to the signs of the times. It can be asked why Merton himself did not simply leave the monastery to return to the world, and there were not a few rumours flying around in the 1960s that he had done just that – all without the slightest foundation. To wonder why he did not leave would be to fail to understand the monk and the writer. In the midst of some of his most challenging times in the 1960s, he engaged with his old friend from Columbia Robert Lax in a series of letters now published as *A Catch of Anti-Letters*.⁹ Lax was then living in the Greek Islands, and their five-year correspondence is both delightful and funny. The playfulness of the language, the ability to understand and use a sense of the ridiculous balanced by Zen drawings from Merton and poems from Lax are all rare insights into how to survive the latter half of the twentieth century. They could not have been written without the trust and intimacy of friendship, and yet one has to recall that Lax and Merton saw very little of one another from the day Merton entered the monastery.

The world of poetry kept Merton hopeful about the development of the human condition. He himself was at times a good poet and, though he wrote a considerable range of poetry, the poetry of his later years seems to be the least appreciated. This is especially true of *The Geography of Lograire*,¹⁰ a work which rewards those readers willing to engage fully with it. In 1968 Merton edited four issues of *Monks Pond*, a journal dedicated to poetry from poets around the world which he illustrated with some of his fine photography. Not all the poetry in *Monks Pond* was good, but its very existence owed everything to Merton's capacity to be alive to his world and to those who were exploring its purpose and meaning.

Merton's concept of spirituality was one that recognized that its end point must be a compassion and concern for the rights and needs of others. This spirituality, while it may grow out of one's religious beliefs and experiences, needs to be open to and respect the spiritual insights of others. An authentic spirituality will be rooted in a life of disciplined awareness of the fundamental mystery of life and existence, its purpose and meaning. For Merton, his spirituality emanated from his Christian faith and tradition with its sense of God and the central place given to the life, death and resurrection of



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Christ. Yet he understood the roots of his own tradition in such an original and fresh way at times that his more unquestioning fellow Catholics were deeply disturbed or angered by his insights and perceptions. Above all, Merton had a concept of spirituality which delighted in engaging with the world instead of escaping from it or simply criticizing it all the time. He himself had to grow into that view from his unquestioning, idealistic phase of Catholicism, but his writings are all the richer for it because they reflect a lived experience rather than an intellectual theory of spirituality. Finally, Merton's concept of spirituality is open to all people. Today, people listening to the Dalai Lama in large crowds will often comment that, despite the presence of many others, they felt His Holiness was talking directly to them. Readers of Merton react to his writings in almost exactly the same way. Something of his writings, his perceptions and insights is so in touch with the fallibility and nobility of the human condition that the reader feels him- or herself being addressed directly.

As indicated earlier, at the beginning of a new millennium and thirty-three years after his death, every one of Merton's books is still in print – a remarkable achievement in its own right. However, what this indicates about Merton is how his insights and ideas continue to contribute to worldviews today as we contemplate what kind of future humankind may have. Merton was ahead of his time in anticipating the challenges the world faced if it did not find a way of balancing technological progress with human dignity, if it did not find a way of enabling the human and civil rights of the individual to be recognized, if it did not confront the debilitating effect of militarism on the peaceful co-existence of the world's nations. Merton also anticipated the need for world faiths to explore issues and concerns in face-to-face encounters which enabled participants not only to celebrate their own traditions but to recognize one another's common humanity. Above all, he prophetically counselled that if the world abandons the integrity and heart of an authentic spirituality, then all would be lost in the truest of senses. Merton contributes to our present and future thinking on these and other issues because new generations seem to come to his writings with the same sense of provocative discovery and challenge as did previous generations. Rising to the provocative challenges he lays before them, his readers in turn interpret his writings and insights according to the needs of the contemporary world, no little achievement for a simple Christian monk.



Thomas Merton is a voice for our times. If this chapter on his life, work and influence has travelled a number of roads and paths, then it is a true reflection of this monk and writer who is almost impossible to pin down. So catholic was he in his outlook and his explorations that people from a range of backgrounds, faith communities and no faith at all are convinced he is writing to their own unique experiences. In addition, if this chapter is not cerebral enough for some, then Thomas Merton would be delighted. This significant figure of the twentieth century, on being given a private showing of the room in Bellarmine College which was to house some of his papers and manuscripts, was heard to remark: 'Ah, yes. Not a bad place to pass wind.'

Notes

1. Jim Forest (1992), *Living with Wisdom* (New York: Orbis), p. iv.
2. Thomas Merton (1948), *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace), p. 8.
3. Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, p. 32.
4. A significant number of these letters can be found in H. William Shannon (ed.) (1985), *Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concern* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).
5. Thomas Merton (1968), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions).
6. Thomas Merton (1966), *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–33.
8. Donald W. Mitchell and James O. S. B. Wiseman (1999), *The Gethsemani Encounter* (New York: Continuum).
9. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax (1994), *A Catch of Anti-Letters* (London: Sheed and Ward).
10. Thomas Merton (1969), *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions).



5. Jiddu Krishnamurti and the open secret

Clive Erricker

Introduction

Coming over the stile into the grove one felt immediately a great sense of peace and stillness. Not a thing was moving. It seemed sacrilegious to walk through it, to tread the ground; it was profane to talk, even to breathe ... to enter this grove not knowing what lay there was a surprise, and a shock, the shock of an unexpected benediction. ... Come when you will and it will be there, full, rich and unnameable.¹

At Brockwood Park, lying in different directions from the school, stand the centre and the grove; two aspects of Krishnamurti are represented in the centre and the grove: the first reflects his analytical mind conveyed in talks and conversations and his personal fastidiousness, the second his poetic nature, in the notebook and journal. The two are linked in the theme of tranquillity and silence. For me the latter appeals more than the former as an environment for the fragmented mind to find its true nature. In the centre I feel Krishnamurti's presence, in the grove I enjoy his absence.

'Krishnamurti is a riddle, and no-one is better qualified than Mary Lutyens to search for the answer.' This quotation from Dervla Murphy's review, in *The Irish Times*, of Mary Lutyen's biography *The Life and Death of Krishnamurti* can be found on its front cover.² Whether Krishnamurti, had he read this, would have responded with his deep laugh in a playful mood, or sternly made clear the error of such a presumption, as in the style adopted in his talks, we cannot be sure. Reading the book makes clear that Lutyens, though she devotes some time to it, does not solve the riddle. More importantly, the idea of solving a riddle is to miss the point. For Krishnamurti there was no riddle to solve, or worth solving. The point was to go beyond the



teacher and see what the teacher was pointing to within oneself. This koanesque understanding was much more applicable to Krishnamurti's teaching and to the understanding of the man himself – although he would never have used such a term. It is with this in mind that this chapter explores both his life and his teachings.

An understanding of Krishnamurti depends on acquaintance with both his experiences and his recorded addresses and conversations or dialogues. To separate the one from the other is akin to meeting two different people. However, the teaching conveyed in his talks required, as far as he was concerned, no need for acquaintance with his life. In fact, the opposite was required: to see into one's own experience. We shall start with his life and move on to a fuller enquiry into his teachings.

Krishnamurti: the process and the presence

As one can read in prefaces to a number of publications of Krishnamurti's teachings expressed in talks, dialogues and discussions subsequently translated into book form, he was a 'discovery' of Annie Besant, President of the Theosophical Society, but Krishnamurti subsequently rejected the title of 'World Teacher' placed upon him and pursued his own path. This did not mean he did not become a 'world teacher', but he did so on his own terms, which rejected institutionalization:

'You can form other organizations and expect someone else', he said. 'With that I am not concerned, nor with creating new cages. . . . My only concern is to set men [*sic*] absolutely, unconditionally free.'³

Prior to the time at which he made this statement – in 1929 at the age of 34 – there is a history of a child discovered in India, in 1909, at the age of 15 by Charles Leadbetter, the chief colleague of Annie Besant. Leadbetter was an eccentric who had 'been involved in a sexual scandal which had split the Theosophical Society throughout the world'.⁴ Nevertheless, it was Leadbetter who became the guardian of Krishna, as he was called, and his younger brother Nitya. This included their development in the form of occult training: taking them, in their astral bodies, while asleep for instruction from the Master.⁵ Krishna had already lost his mother and elder sister; his youngest brother was mentally retarded. Krishna himself was



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considered stupid at school and was repeatedly caned for inattention. Leadbetter himself became exasperated with his inattentive and dreamy nature, especially the way his mouth would drop open as he apparently stared at nothing through the window. When Leadbetter once slapped him on the chin for this, it became a turning point in their relationship which stayed in Krishnamurti's memory.⁶ When one takes all this into account we are hardly disposed to expect that a 'world teacher' will emerge, but this was what was announced when Annie Besant took the two boys to England to live in 1911. The incongruous sight, at Charing Cross Station, of an elderly eccentric Victorian lady with two young Indian boys, one on each arm, surrounded by members of the Theosophical Society, is captured in a photograph of the event.⁷

One is tempted to interpret events so far from one of two perspectives. Either one is taken under the theosophical spell, immersed in its esotericism, and, despite the strangeness of it all, we have what was prophesied. Or we are witnessing what is clearly a bizarre example of cultishness that any sane and sensible person can easily dismiss. In what follows it is difficult to apply either interpretation, and that is the surprise Krishnamurti has in store. Lutyen's abridged biography and the three volumes that provide a larger account of Krishnamurti's life⁸ sympathetically unfolds the tale. It reads in turns as though one is immersed in a biography, and then involved in an uncanny recording of inexplicable experiences. These weave together as relationships, events, talks and teachings react back on the certainties of one's own reality and question it.

The sanity of Krishnamurti's teachings and their relation to everyday concern emerge from pain-racked trance experiences that visit him throughout his life. His teachings speak of there being no mystery; the mysteriousness of the experiences appears to contradict this. But the contradiction may lie only in the fragmented rational conception of the world with which we seek to provide an interpretation of events, a conception that Krishnamurti passionately tells us to discard. The 'three-day experience' related by Lutyens marks the beginning of a transformation in Krishnamurti. These experiences came at intervals in his life from then on. Coming on 17 May 1922, it pre-dates and is the precursor of his separation from the Theosophical Society, as announced above, and the Order of the Star that they set up, within which he was proclaimed as the new 'World Teacher'. It occurred at Ojai in California in the presence of his



younger brother Nitya, and two other friends associated with the Theosophical Society, Mr Warrington and Rosalind. Nitya gave the main account of this event. Krishna was unable to remember much of what happened, as was the case with subsequent experiences.

Physically, the event consisted of recurring periods of trembling, shivering and feeling unbearable heat. Along with this came the contraction of muscles, sensitivity to sound, dirt and any sensation, vomiting, loss of consciousness and great pain. Krishna spoke of being in touch with Annie Besant and others of the central group of theosophists and imagined himself with them in Adyar, India. He spoke of longing to go there. The interpretation of all this is given by Nitya in theosophical terms. At the end of this period Nitya states, 'Then suddenly the whole house seemed full of a terrific force and Krishna was as if possessed. . . . Suddenly he announced his intention of going for a walk alone.'⁹ Dissuading him from this they took him on to the veranda where Warrington urged him to sit under a young pepper tree a few yards away. After doing this Krishna suddenly called out, 'Oh why didn't you send me out here before?' Then he began to chant, then silence. The following day he lay out under the tree all day in samadhi, recounts Nitya.¹⁰ Rosalind has visions of the Buddha Maitreya's presence. He speaks to her. They hear the music of the Gandharvas. Effectively, it is a repetition of the enlightenment of Siddhartha, but this time it is Krishna.

Krishnamurti records, as an inner or psychological record of the experience, without the mythic supernaturalism:

I was supremely happy. . . . Nothing could ever be the same. I have drunk of the clear and pure waters at the source of the fountain of life and my thirst was appeased. Nevermore could I be thirsty . . . I have touched compassion which heals all sorrow and suffering . . . my heart can never be closed . . . I am God-intoxicated.¹¹

These experiences occurred regularly in the following period, and at certain points every evening. What came to be called 'the process' involved Krishna, at this point, speaking to his mother at various intervals:

'O, mother, why did you bear me for this? . . . Mother, everything will be different now, life will never be the same for any of us after this. I've seen Him, mother, and nothing matters now.'

He revisited his childhood and his mother's death:



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'Don't take it [the medicine] mother ... the doctor does not know anything Why are you so still mother, what's happened, and why does father cover his face with his dhoti, mother, answer me, mother.'¹²

It is not hard to find psychological and emotional reasons, embedded in Krishnamurti's store of memories, to explain aspects of these events. It would be easy to dismiss Rosalind's visions, of which she had no memory afterwards, as the emotional projections of a 19-year-old woman caught up in the romantic fantasies of an occult movement, but such analyses do not really get to the heart of the matter.

Another way of approaching this is provided in the neurologist Oliver Sacks' commentary on Hildegard of Bingen.¹³ I do not think we can make a direct comparison but can raise the conjecture of a symptomatic equivalence. That is, we can say that certain neurological symptoms can give rise to an appreciation of reality that is divorced from the mundane, or ordinary, conceptualization of reality. The richness of such an idea is that it does not reduce the spiritual to a rationalistic interpretation, nor does it leave the spiritual assigned to the realm of a romantic or enchanted escapism. Krishnamurti's own understanding of these happenings is supportive of this, though he would not have regarded any interpretation as helpful or necessary.

As Krishnamurti explained 'the process' as it unfolded continuously throughout his life until his death, we are left with a commentary on the notion of 'the presence' as he encountered and understood it. What is surprising is how it punctuates Mary Lutyens' biography, yet remains absent from any of Krishnamurti's teachings beyond the point at which he ended his association with the Theosophical Society.

The 'commentary' begins, after the first experience, with a remark following a talk at the Star Congress on 28 December 1925.¹⁴ 'I personally feel ... like a crystal vase ... anybody in the world can put a beautiful flower in it and the flower shall live in the vase and never die.' This was an explanation of the idea that Krishnamurti believed it was not he who was speaking but that he was being used to be spoken through, a vessel or, as he wrote to Lady Emily, 'a shell – so absolutely impersonal'.¹⁵ On 9 February 1927 he wrote to Leadbetter, 'I know with certainty that I am blending into the consciousness of the one Teacher and that He will completely fill me ... I long to make and will make everybody happy.'¹⁶ At the point of



rupture with the Theosophical Society he made the proclamation that denied his status in their eyes, but raised it in relation to his own self-proclamation:

Do not quote me afterwards as an authority. I refuse to be your crutch. I am not going to be brought into a cage for your worship. . . . Friends, do not concern yourself with who I am, you will never know. . . . Do you think Truth has anything to do with what you think I am? . . . Drink the water if the water is clean: I say to you that I have that clean water . . . I am all things because I am Life.¹⁷

A statement of truly Christlike proportions! Yet his later addresses, as did the majority of his writings, never again made reference to the 'I' or first person in such terms. The hubris was entirely absent, at least with reference to where his power or energy came from. On 30 May 1948, in another account of 'the process', he states, 'Deep inside me I know what has happened. I have been stocked with gasoline. The tank is full.' And 'They have burnt me so that there can be more emptiness. They want to see how much of him can come.'¹⁸ The effect, as observed, on Krishnamurti once the pain had subsided is witnessed on various occasions. These comments are typical: 'There was a change in K's face. His eyes became larger and wider and deeper, and there was a tremendous look, beyond any possible space. It was as if there were a powerful presence which belonged to another dimension. There was an inexplicable feeling of emptiness and fullness at the same time.'¹⁹

Nine days before he died in 1986 Krishnamurti asked friends to tape-record something he wanted to say:

For seventy years that super energy – no – that immense energy, immense intelligence, has been using this body. I don't think people realise what tremendous energy and intelligence went through this body . . . and now the body can't stand any more. . . . Nobody can understand what went through this body. Nobody. Don't anybody pretend. . . . When he goes, it goes. There is no consciousness left behind of *that* consciousness, of *that* state. . . . And so that's that.²⁰

As Mary Lutyens remarked when she set out to write the first volume of biography, 'I had misgivings as to the advisability of publishing it, the story was at once so crazy and yet somehow so sacred.'²¹



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The teachings

THE POVERTY OF THOUGHT

Intelligence is the antithesis of thought. To put it more precisely, in intelligence there is no thesis or antithesis, because there is no thought. Time, love, truth, fear, conflict, all these basic concepts are the result of an arising driven by the thinking 'I', the ego which seeks to become what it as yet is not. Thus the eradication or dismissal of that 'I', and the dualistic character of consciousness, is the intention that threads through the numerous talks and dialogues of Krishnamurti. Again, the wording of this understanding is not entirely precise. The point is the irrelevance of thinking and the systemics or structures of thinking, which rely on a dualism of perception. It is this dualism that creates conflict. Such conflict is inimical to world affairs, and the projects of history and progress. The antidote to such failures of human purpose was, for Krishnamurti, the understanding of meditation as 'the emptying of the content of consciousness'.²²

Meditation, for Krishnamurti, presumed:

to see what one is, actually, as though one was looking at oneself in a mirror, psychologically; thereby bringing about a transformation in the structure of oneself ... a mind that is in meditation must find out what action is (in this). Time has come to an end and there is a totally different kind of movement, in silence.²³

This silence is a 'Freedom from the content of one's consciousness'.²⁴ This presumes the collapse of conceptual categories and a realization that language, the expression of the structure of thought, is wholly misleading in its construction of reality – indeed it is positively harmful if understood as such. Thus Krishnamurti used rationality as a tool to uncover its own inadequacy by applying it to an empirical examination of the psyche.

In uncovering what one actually is, one asks: Is the observer, oneself, different from that which one observes – psychologically that is. I am angry, I am greedy, I am violent; is that I different from the thing observed, which is anger, greed, violence? Is one different? Obviously not. When I am angry there is no I that is angry, there is only anger. So anger is me; the observer is the observed. The division is eliminated altogether. The observer is the observed and therefore conflict ends.²⁵



Conflict, and its causes, was a persistent central theme in Krishnamurti's addresses and dialogues. It is the issue on which his dialogues with the physicist David Bohm begins.²⁶ Krishnamurti's argument is that conflict is psychological in nature, and from that we can identify its outward expression in events. The trajectory of his argument is that conflict arises in the idea of becoming something better than we are. In this desire we see the emergence of egoistic attachment to achievement. This can be identified not only in secular notions of progress, but also in religious ambition. Such ambition is expressed in doctrine.²⁷ Such doctrines betray the presence of psychological conflict in expressing the need to move from how things are to how they should be. For Krishnamurti the error is twofold. First, it shows how the notion of becoming, implying the acceptance of time as the realm of reality, is pervasive in producing such desire, and controls the thinking of those for whom such desire is paramount. Second, it indicates how conflict, in the form of wishing to become something other than what is, pervades human thinking and consequent dissatisfaction. Conflict arises out of the desire inherent in becoming. For Krishnamurti this false consciousness, or idea of consciousness, prevents us from seeing beyond the temporal sphere. He expresses this in the rhetorical question: 'Is it that one's brain is so accustomed to conflict that one rejects any other form of living?'²⁸

THE CIRCUS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

This highlights Krishnamurti's concern with any sense of division, and is pursued most directly, as a central theme, in his dialogue with Alain Naude on the whole of life.²⁹ He identifies three primary distinctions made in the way in which we conceive of the world: the outer, the inner and the beyond. We recognize problems in the outer world, which we try to solve but lack solutions for. We treat them as specific problems or ills in need of address at particular times. But they recur, apparently inevitably. Equally, we identify inner problems and attempt to treat them in the same fashion: discrete issues that can be put right. If we cannot solve the outer or inner problems we look beyond for solutions or consolation – to the divine. What we call knowledge is constructed on the basis of these divisions, requiring specialists in whatever field, addressing these



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separate problems. For Krishnamurti, this wrong-headedness is the problem. It is consciousness that is in disorder. It is the projection of this into the outer world that causes disorder there. Recognition of the interrelationship and interdependence between outer and inner, and my consciousness and that of others, brings us to the realization that our understanding is distorted. It is this human consciousness that has to undergo radical change. Using the metaphor of a juggler, Krishnamurti explains that our fragmented understanding involves, as Naude puts it, 'Juggling with the contents of this huge box (consciousness)'.³⁰

Consciousness is made up of all the things that have been collected, labelled and understood as experience, knowledge, emotions and states of mind, etc. The juggler juggles with the contents. The understanding is of two different entities: the content and the one who juggles the contents. This is still the same basic division found in 'inner' and 'outer', but the juggler is himself a part of the content of consciousness which he juggles. All the while we think of ourselves as jugglers of the content of consciousness we fall into the fundamental error that is the cause of the confusion. Thus, ironically, as we do more juggling to solve the problems, so we create the activity that perpetuates them. Similarly, apparent attempts to act ethically in this process are, at the same time, contributing to the perpetuation of it. Attempts at change imply an entity separate within consciousness, who can bring about a transformation.³¹

In this way life becomes a constant battle for control and order. But the disorder resides in the fragmented consciousness of the one trying to create the order – a projection of the internal incoherence, which in turn is a state of affairs that arises out of the idea that there is something to be done. Even in the act of observation, and the sense of difference discerned between observer and observed, the problem is inherent. Observing – an apparently neutral act – is informed by the thought that separates observer and observed: what Krishnamurti refers to as the censorship inherent in the observer's observation.³² In this the fragmentation of consciousness is already apparent.³³ In this division there is conflict even before 'action' in the 'outer world' has taken place. This is because the will has already been evoked by the sense of difference implied in the act of observing. We may say that it leads to discrimination because it is based on discrimination. This discrimination appears healthy, an ordering of things on which we act appropriately



through judgement. For Krishnamurti the opposite is the case. The circus goes on, and it goes on 'only when there is the exercise of the will'.³⁴

Far from ordering the world, the will seeks to impose an order based on the perception of fragmentation. The will arises out of this fragmentation, because the fragmentation is consciousness itself. What we call consciousness is, in fact, both the product of fragmentation (as a conceptualization based on difference), and the creator of fragmentation. 'Consciousness is its fragments and consciousness is the battle between the fragments.'³⁵ Intellectual recognition of this state of affairs is not in itself the basis for changing it. This is the case because intellectual recognition is still bound up in the fragmentation of consciousness, and because change is also a concept within the logic of fragmentation. Thought cannot unlock the cell of its own making.

RELIGION AND THE SACRED

Krishnamurti was intransigent concerning the lack of value of religion and tradition. He asserts, 'Sacredness is a fetish'.³⁶ And 'So I won't accept anything that anybody says about what is sacred. Tradition! As a Brahmin one was brought up in a tradition which would beat anybody's tradition, I assure you!'³⁷ He was equally disparaging about philosophy. He regarded philosophy as an amusement for philosophers – it was not serious.³⁸ What prompted this lack of regard was Krishnamurti's conviction that, far from being vehicles towards truth, both religion and philosophy were prime hindrances to the capacity of seeing directly, of direct awareness, direct contact. The giving of one's whole attention, and recognizing that attention, in itself, 'is a living thing, moving and vital'³⁹ and is the means to this direct awareness, since it erases the distinction between observer and observed. It cuts through the whole clutter of religion and ideology, and from this love emerges.

Virtue is beauty and beauty is love, and without love you have no virtue and therefore no order ... looking at that sky with your whole being, that very act of looking has its own discipline and therefore its own virtue, its own order ... see things as they are and come directly in contact with them ... Then out of this there comes into being love. Love is tremendously passionate and therefore it acts immediately.⁴⁰



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What we might term this flow of meditative awareness is only possible without restriction. The conceptual and dogmatic constructions of religion are precisely the opposite: constrictions requiring a centre of truth and barriers against untruth. Rather than 'consciousness empty[ing] itself of its contents',⁴¹ we are requiring somebody else to do it. The 'seed of intelligence' lies in the recognition of 'the limitations of the old' in this respect.⁴² Krishnamurti makes a psychological and historical parallel here in identifying history – that is tradition – with the 'old brain', the repository of 'knowledge' in memory. This activity of the old brain prevents the recognition of the new. Thus, for Krishnamurti, what we may call the capacity for spiritual awareness (the awakening of intelligence), the realization of a new dimension, takes place only when the old brain becomes quiet. The radical conclusion to be drawn from this is that those mystics within religious traditions who have arrived at this point have done so despite, rather than because of, the teachings and practices of the tradition itself. Or, understanding this a little differently, only when teaching and method have become exhausted do we stop striving in the old way. Krishnamurti was not susceptible to the second interpretation. He announces:

What have we done up till now? The people on whom we have relied, the religions, the churches, education, they have led us to this awful mess. We aren't free of sorrow; we aren't free of our beastliness, our ugliness, our vanities.⁴³

We may claim, therefore, that one of Krishnamurti's great achievements was the removal of the division between the religious and the secular by showing that both constructs maintained themselves by similar, inauthentic, rational devices. The limitation of their constructs was, and is, the service of temporal rather than spiritual aspiration. This can be construed as wilful political ambition at certain points, and in some cases. But it can also be understood, in part, as becoming engaged in the delusion of rational thought, without sufficient attention being paid to its limitations and overweening pretensions. From Krishnamurti's position the latter would still be a somewhat understated and charitable judgement.

If tradition is vaingloriously deceitful the teacher cannot escape the same judgement. Any teacher who claims to know falls into the same error. Knowledge is of the past, and is necessarily a product of memory. It is stored in the fragmented consciousness; therefore it is



not real.⁴⁴ Whether 'guru' is understood as 'the one who points', or 'the one who brings enlightenment', the notion of helping or lifting your burden is implicitly or explicitly present. Such a notion is a hindrance, it is about division: 'instead of lifting your burden they impose their burden upon you.'⁴⁵

This, of course, raises the question as to whether Krishnamurti himself should be regarded as a teacher. There is no simple answer to this. In the terms that he speaks in above he would not regard himself as such. Yet he gave teachings. Insofar as he eschewed the idea that he gave teachings to be followed, he undermined the role of the teacher – the point was to look to oneself. Insofar as what he had to say came from an authority or presence beyond him and he was only the vehicle, we can recognize the import of his statement. His refusal to be the posthumous founder of an organized movement, a point elaborated on below, lends the greatest significance to what is otherwise a somewhat ambiguous conceptual conundrum which frustrated his closest companions.

Beyond Krishnamurti

Krishnamurti had insisted that no cult should be allowed to grow up around him, that places where he had lived should not become sites of pilgrimages, and that no one in the Foundation should set themselves up as an authority on his teachings.⁴⁶ Such is the case. At Brockwood Park his teachings and presence are preserved in books, on audio and videotape, and now on CD-ROM. The biographies have been written and more may yet come. There are still enthusiastic 'followers', but no organized cult. It is easy to see how one could have emerged. His charismatic presence, the enigma surrounding his experiences and their supernatural quality, the originality of the teachings, and the dramatic statements he made concerning his work and what can be called his mission add up to the makings of a gospel. All this despite a life that, from the outside at least, appears essentially bourgeois.

The legacy of Krishnamurti lies in the schools and the Foundation established in different parts of the world, notably India, Britain and California. At a staff meeting in Brockwood Park School on 21 September 1985 he said that of the hundreds of students who had passed through his oldest school, Rishi Valley in India, not one had



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been changed. After the meeting he was asked, 'What was the point of having students if none of them in all these years had been changed? If, with all his influence, no student had been transformed, how could the rest of us, who had apparently not changed either, bring about change in the students? "If you haven't done it, is there any likelihood we can?"' His reply was 'I don't know', but this was said in a joking, and perhaps evasive, fashion.⁴⁷

Within this exchange I think we can find something of the difficulty that existed between his teachings and his experiences. We may take this step by step. First, the experiences of the process and the presence were expressed couched in terms of the legacy of the theosophical worldview. But the teachings were not. These had a clarity and sense that could appeal to a late twentieth-century audience and concerned scientists as well as philosophers and 'lay' people in a secularized world. There was no recourse to esoteric or religious understandings doctrinally circumscribed. Why was this?

One answer is that they were manifestly separate, but this appears impossible in the light of the link that Krishnamurti himself made between them. The question then becomes, 'What was the link, precisely?' If what he taught was actually coming from a presence within him but also beyond him, weren't the teachings ultimately from a source beyond himself? This is what Krishnamurti implied when he saw himself as a vessel. If this is so, was the capacity to 'see directly' that the teachings pointed to also a result of the experiences he had undergone? If so, how could anyone else be changed but him – and the evidence was that they had not been. However, such a conclusion negates the importance of the teachings for others. What he ardently exhorts is impossibility, a chimera, a mirage. The teachings are then false. Krishnamurti was an enigma, but the riddle lies beyond him. One can conjecture that he took it with him to his death and that it is implied in his evasive reply to why nobody had been changed. It can also be seen to inform his response to the recorded statement he made nine days before his death, quoted above, that nobody could understand his experiences. He was asked at that time to clarify what he meant in case of misunderstanding. He became very upset and remarked, 'You have no right to interfere with this.'⁴⁸

Yet still this explanation, inviting the explanation that the intelligence he speaks of was uniquely imparted to him from another source, will not fully suffice. It focuses too much on the man rather



than on what he was pointing to. A subtler connection may be made if we consider the implications of the message. What appears to be required is a change in what we call civilization by attending to a change in ourselves. What Krishnamurti meant by this revolution that requires no effort is encapsulated in his words on meditation:

Meditation is not an escape from the world; it is not an isolating self-enclosing activity, but rather the comprehension of the world and its ways. The world has little to offer apart from food, clothes and shelter, and pleasure with its great sorrows.

Meditation is wandering away from this world; one has to be a total outsider. Then the world has a meaning Then love is not pleasure. From this all action begins that is not the outcome of tension, contradiction, the search for self-fulfilment or the conceit of power.⁴⁹

Translating this injunction into the everyday is not achieved easily, but it can begin with education. Krishnamurti was concerned that the organization and busy-ness of the Foundation's schools might be taking precedence over the teaching, in which case intelligence would suffer:

Intelligence is common to all of us and that will bring us together, not organization. If you see the importance that each one of us is free and that freedom implies love, consideration, attention, co-operation, compassion – that intelligence is the factor to keep us together.⁵⁰

And to a teacher at Brockwood School, Scott Forbes, he spelt this out further, in relation to the spirituality of the teachers and the education of the students:

The thing itself, the seed itself – like in a womb, you have nothing to do. It grows. It is there. It is bound to grow. It is bound to flourish Is Scott aware that the seed is there? Is Scott preventing the flowering of it by too much activity, too much organisation, not giving it sufficient air to flower?⁵¹

A sufficient comment to make us reflect on our own approach to education and life, and the practical significance of two qualities he highly valued: humility and benediction. This, at least, is Krishnamurti's legacy, and acquaints us with the open secret.



Notes

1. J. Krishnamurti (1982), 'Brockwood Park, Hampshire: September 14, 1973', *Krishnamurti's Journal* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco).
2. Mary Lutyens (1991), *The Life and Death of Krishnamurti* (London: Rider).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 80.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5. Lutyens is clearly of the opinion that Leadbetter had homosexual tendencies but this was not substantiated. Krishnamurti's relationship with him over the years became distanced before becoming more amicable later on.
5. This is recorded in Lutyens, *ibid.*, p. 9. The Masters, according to the beliefs of the Theosophists, were perfected souls who stayed in touch with humanity to help them with their spiritual evolution. Lutyens gives a summary of the movement (*ibid.*, pp. 1–3 and *passim*). Krishnamurti was identified as the individual chosen by the one beyond the Masters, the Buddha Maitreya, to be the vehicle for his return.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, facing p. 76.
8. These are *The Boy Krishna*, *The Years of Fulfilment* and *The Open Door*. All are available from the Krishnamurti Foundation Trust, Brockwood Park, Bramdean, Hampshire SO24 0LQ, England. E-mail: info@brockwood.org.uk
9. Lutyens, *ibid.*, p. 39.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 43–5.
13. O. Sacks (1986), 'The visions of Hildegard', in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (London: Pan Books), pp. 158–62. Sacks ascribed Hildegard's visions to migrainous attacks, but her reports on the experiences and the art that was the result were attributed to the workings and will of God. Sacks refuses to equivocate on the matter of their significance, but remarks, 'They provide a unique example of the manner in which a physiological event, banal, hateful or meaningless to the vast majority of people, can become, in a privileged consciousness, the substrate of a supreme ecstatic inspiration' (pp. 161–2). He goes on to remark on the epileptic experiences of Dostoevsky with a similar regard.
14. An inner circle of the Theosophical Society devoted to Krishnamurti as the 'World Teacher'.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 61. Lady Emily and Annie Besant were the two women closest to him in his life. Despite the later rupture with the Theosophical



- Society and Lady Emily being an outspoken critic in private correspondence, their affection for him personally and his warmth towards them remained.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
 18. *Ibid.*, pp. 102–3.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 118. This record was made by a friend, Vanda, with whom Krishnamurti was staying in Gstaad, Switzerland. This visit marked the beginning of the annual talks at the nearby village of Saanen.
 20. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
 21. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
 22. Title of the first talk recorded in J. Krishnamurti (1991), *The Wholeness of Life* (London: Gollancz), pp. 141–6.
 23. *Ibid.*, pp. 141–4.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
 26. J. Krishnamurti and D. Bohm (1991), *The Ending of Time: Thirteen Dialogues* (London: Gollancz).
 27. Here Krishnamurti refers illustratively to the Christian idea of Original Sin and the Hindu idea of Karma. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 29. 'The circus of man's struggle: conversation between J. Krishnamurti and Alain Naude', in J. Krishnamurti (1987), *The Awakening of Intelligence* (San Francisco: HarperCollins), pp. 105–23. Alain Naude was secretary and assistant to Krishnamurti for six years, and also his student.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
 31. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
 33. *Ibid.*, pp. 116–17.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
 36. 'On inner space; on tradition and dependence: conversation between J. Krishnamurti and Professor J. Needleman', in J. Krishnamurti (1987), *The Awakening of Intelligence*, p. 45.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
 39. Krishnamurti, *The Awakening of Intelligence*, Part V: Three talks in Madras, 3. 'The Sacred', p. 215.
 40. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
 41. 'On inner space; on tradition and dependence: conversation between J. Krishnamurti and Professor J. Needleman', in Krishnamurti, *The Awakening of Intelligence*, p. 46.



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42. Krishnamurti, *The Awakening of Intelligence*, Part VIII: Five dialogues in Sanaa, 2. 'Is intelligence awake', pp. 401–12.
43. 'The role of the teacher: conversation between J. Krishnamurti and Professor J. Needleman', in Krishnamurti, *The Awakening of Intelligence*, p. 26.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
45. *Ibid.*
46. Lutyens, p. 199.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
49. J. Krishnamurti (1973), *The Only Revolution*, ed. Mary Lutyens (London: Gollancz), p. 9.
50. Lutyens, p. 191.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 191.



6. The Dalai Lama

Dimensions of spirituality

Geshe Thupten Jinpa

The person

Among the leaders of the world's major religions, the position of the Dalai Lama is perhaps the most intriguing. For the people of Tibet he is both spiritual and temporal leader, yet as a stateless person he has no formal status in that leadership so far as the outside world is concerned. For the Buddhist world he is the most internationally recognizable figure, yet, contrary to what many may believe in the West, he does not occupy a supreme leadership authority as does the Pope in Roman Catholicism. For millions of activists worldwide, the Dalai Lama is an ardent advocate of peace, justice, equality, human rights and environmental concern. For many more millions he remains an exotic personality with a fascinating yet strange cultural and religious background. Finally, for the fellow leaders of the world's major religions, the Dalai Lama is a powerful figure in the promotion of greater inter-religious understanding and tolerance. Yet the Dalai Lama's advocacy of more secular and universal discourse on ethics and spirituality makes him an ally of the forces of 'secularism', which the religious groups generally perceive as undermining spirituality.¹ At the personal level, however, the Dalai Lama describes himself as 'a simple Buddhist monk, no more, no less'.

Though somewhat of a 'newcomer to the modern world',² as he eloquently puts it, the Dalai Lama appears to have rapidly risen to become one of the most important voices of conscience of the twentieth century. This may partly be due to the ongoing tragedy of the Tibetan people. Primarily, however, it may be because of the Dalai Lama's persistent campaign for peace, his advocacy of a



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‘human approach’ to social and political problems,³ his powerful public expression of concerns for the fate of the natural world, and his promotion of a better understanding between the followers of the world’s major religions. It is these factors that seem to have won him respect and recognition from millions of people worldwide. His steadfast refusal to adopt violence as a means of struggle for the freedom of Tibet and his advocacy of world peace earned him the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize. Today, for many, the Dalai Lama appears to symbolize basic human goodness and moral integrity, and a powerful beacon of spiritual rejuvenation in human society.

Undoubtedly, much of the Dalai Lama’s appeal comes from his gentle and humorous personality as well. Every interaction with him, whether public or personal, seems to leave a powerful impression. Often, many who met him report that the natural warmth, spontaneity and sheer presence which radiate from the man in his interaction with others are almost tangible. One also gets a sense that here is an individual, who though deeply committed to a spiritual path, possesses a tremendous degree of joyfulness in life. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama appears to be one of the rare species among religious figures who, while remaining firmly devoted to a religious way of life, do not appear to judge others from a moral high ground. If there is one absolute principle for the Dalai Lama that supersedes all values it is compassion – a sense of connectedness to and caring for others.

Though brought up in the classical Tibetan monastic system of education, the Dalai Lama’s interests remain highly eclectic. Ever since his childhood, he has retained his fascination for science and technology.⁴ He continues to keep abreast of the latest developments in the scientific world, mainly through informal friendships with some of the leading figures in that world, and also through ongoing dialogues with scientists from various disciplines.⁵ Despite his enthusiasm for scientific views, his worldview remains deeply grounded in his Buddhist philosophy and religion. Politically, the Dalai Lama’s instincts appear to be close to what could be described as the mainstream Western liberal tradition. This is evidenced in his strong advocacy of democracy and human rights. He has even argued that if the establishment of democracy based on genuine respect for human rights in a society conflicts with certain aspects of its traditional culture, it is the cultural tradition that must change and not vice versa.⁶ Yet, in his social and economic views, the Dalai



Lama still remains committed to some form of socialism despite the collapse of many of the former socialist-communist states in Eastern Europe and Russia. It is this kind of background that gives a great complexity to the Dalai Lama's personality, and also tremendous scope for others to project whatever qualities they would wish to perceive in the person.

Spirituality as basic goodness

From the very early stages of his encounter with the modern world, especially through his travels to the West, the Dalai Lama appears to have appreciated the critical need to distinguish between what he calls the 'two levels of spirituality'. One is the concept of spirituality as understood within the framework of the beliefs and practices of established religious systems such as Buddhism or Christianity, while the other is a more basic notion of spirituality understood in terms of what could be called the fundamental aspects of our human nature. In his recent work *Ethics for the New Millennium*, the Dalai Lama draws the distinction more sharply in the following manner:

Actually, I believe there is an important distinction to be made between religion and spirituality. Religion, I take to be concerned with faith in the claims of salvation of one faith tradition or another, an aspect of which is acceptance of some form of metaphysical or supernatural reality, including perhaps an idea of heaven or *nirvana*. Connected with this are religious teachings or dogma, ritual, prayer, and so on. Spirituality I take to be concerned with those qualities of the human spirit – such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony – which bring happiness both to self and others. While ritual and prayer, along with questions of *nirvana* and salvation, are directly connected to religious faith, these inner qualities need not be, however.⁷

The Dalai Lama argues that appreciation of such distinction is critical if we are to sustain and develop further what are, to his mind, the central messages of all major religious teachings, namely the principles of compassion, forgiveness, tolerance and the sense of universal brotherhood and sisterhood. He believes that it is no longer viable to see these important human values as special purviews of established religions. In fact, he argues, to do so is detrimental, for it



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undermines the universality of these spiritual principles. According to the Dalai Lama, the teachings of the world's religions are secondary in that they are means by which these basic human qualities are strengthened and enhanced. Thus, at least in principle, religious beliefs and practices are distinct from the basic spiritual values of the human mind and heart. At the core of this redefined sense of spirituality is what he calls the 'sense of concern for others' well-being', an idea that is based on the Tibetan principle known as *shen phen gyi sem*, which literally means 'the thought to be of help to others'. In other words, the Dalai Lama sees that true spirituality must have something to do with compassion, either directly or indirectly. There is a further sense in which the religions can be said to be secondary, while the basic spiritual values are primary. As the Dalai Lama puts it, 'when we are born, we are free of religion; but we are not free of the need for human affection.'

Perhaps the most important consideration that compelled the Dalai Lama to make such a distinction between the two levels of spirituality has more to do with his pragmatism. He has often underlined the importance of accepting today's reality where religions no longer play the central role in providing the basic framework of living for the majority of the world's population. Furthermore, the Dalai Lama concedes that even without religious faith an individual can lead a meaningful and 'happy' life. He puts this point forcefully in the following:

the influence of religion on people's lives is generally marginal, especially in the developed world. It is doubtful whether globally even a billion are what I would call dedicated religious practitioners, that is to say, people who try, on a daily basis, faithfully to follow the principles and precepts of their faith. The rest remain, in this sense, non-practicing. Those who are dedicated practitioners meanwhile follow a multiplicity of religious paths. From this, it becomes clear that given our diversity, no single religion satisfies all humanity. We may also conclude that we humans can live quite well without recourse to religious faith.⁸

In the Dalai Lama's view, the central problem with the traditional equation of spirituality with religious faith is that it leaves no scope for ethical discourse in a world where secular and not religious ideas dictate the norms of the majority of people's lives. He feels that this leads to the natural consequence whereby if an individual perceives that religious faith is no longer relevant to his or her personal life, there is the tendency to surmise that spiritual values such as



compassion and tolerance too are no longer relevant. In other words, when one rejects the truth of religion, one also tends to reject the universality of the truths of these ethical principles. This, the Dalai Lama argues, is detrimental not only to society but is ultimately destructive to the individual as well.

In brief, the Dalai Lama appears to be suggesting that it is one thing for a society to confine religions as matters of private choice and concern. It is, however, an entirely different issue when a society attempts to do the same with matters of ethics, which, in his view, constitute the core of basic spirituality. In other words, the Dalai Lama seems to be arguing that being ethical and spiritual is fundamental to being a human being. One may free oneself of the religious beliefs but one can never be free of the imperatives of basic human qualities.

Once the meaning of spirituality is successfully recast within his framework of the 'two levels of spirituality', the Dalai Lama believes, then the message of spirituality not only assumes a greater universality. More importantly, he appears to think, this will bring greater clarity to the message as well. Furthermore, we are then in a stronger position to argue for the continued relevance of spirituality in the contemporary, secular world. This is because spirituality now becomes directly concerned with the well-being of both the individual and society. It becomes explicitly related to the natural aspiration to be happy and overcome suffering, which is fundamental to all of us. Here, then, is the central premise of the Dalai Lama's argument for the universality of spirituality; namely that we all naturally aspire to happiness. Often the Dalai Lama elevates this aspiration to the point where he suggests that the purpose of existence is to seek happiness.

This assertion that the attainment of happiness is the purpose of life is perhaps the least understood part of the Dalai Lama's spiritual message. Some find the idea too simplistic, and many simply do not understand what would be meant by 'happiness' in such a context. Perhaps much of the problem stems from the natural assumption many people make about spirituality and morality having no relation to one's own personal happiness. In fact, in many people's minds, the attainment of personal well-being is antithetical to doing 'good', which is what they see as the core of spiritual practice. For example, a critical reviewer writes:



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Doing good and being happy are not the same as ultimate purposes. And then there are those who believe that the purpose of life is to praise God and to obey His commandments. For them happiness is not the main goal.⁹

Perhaps what the Dalai Lama means is that the quest for happiness lies at the very heart of our existence. And, given that genuine happiness arises within the context of a sense of caring for others and sharing in their suffering, one can argue that the ultimate purpose of human life is to seek happiness, in this redefined sense, through a spiritually awakened way of life. Space prevents us from delving too deeply into this issue. Suffice here to underline that, in the Dalai Lama's view, there is a close correlation between spirituality and the attainment of personal well-being.

Certainly this appeal to a basic egoism that lies at the heart of our interaction with others and the world around us as an aspect of the redefinition of spirituality is most intriguing. He is suggesting that, in the final analysis, spirituality is good for oneself. There is a certain simplicity in the basic argument. It proceeds something like the following. If it is true that our fundamental aspiration is to be happy and to overcome suffering, and furthermore, if it is this quest that motivates us in our lives, then spirituality is the most assured means by which we can fulfil this basic aspiration. In other words, if we wish to attain happiness and overcome suffering, we must lead a spiritual life. Thus he is suggesting that being altruistic is the most effective path to attaining one's ultimate aspiration. The Dalai Lama does appear to be aware of this seeming contradiction; namely, that being concerned with others' well-being assures the fulfilment of one's self-interest. At times the Dalai Lama actually calls this the course of the 'wise selfish'. In contrast, those who remained concerned only with their own well-being and remain oblivious to that of others are 'foolish selfish'. Thus the central principle of the Dalai Lama's spirituality is compassion. In fact, he is most eloquent and also passionate when he writes about the virtues of compassion. For example, he writes, 'Thus we can reject everything else: religion, ideology, all received wisdom. But we cannot escape the necessity of love and compassion.' He continues, 'Our own heart, our own mind, is the temple. The doctrine is compassion. Love for others and respect for their rights and dignity, no matter who or what they are: ultimately these are all we need.'¹⁰

However, for the Dalai Lama, being spiritual and ethical is not a



matter of simply deciding to be more compassionate. Rather, it entails a sustained adoption of inner discipline. For example, he writes:

I believe that developing compassion on which happiness depends demands a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, we need to restrain those factors which inhibit compassion. On the other, we need to cultivate those which are conducive to it. ... The first thing, then – because the spiritual qualities conducive to compassion entail positive ethical conduct – is to cultivate a habit of inner discipline. I do not deny that this is a major undertaking, but at least we are familiar with the principle.¹¹

Thus we are told that being spiritual entails, perhaps most importantly, dealing with such powerful emotions as anger, jealousy, attachment, arrogance, and so on. He suggests that finding some way of dealing with these emotions is essential even for one's own personal well-being. A reviewer of the Dalai Lama's recent book succinctly describes this interesting approach to spirituality in terms of basic human qualities in the following:

There is nothing difficult or esoteric about this book. The problems of the world are addressed from a religiously neutral stance, and his hope and wisdom are offered to everyone, believers and nonbelievers alike. He understands that ethical matters are individual matters, that an ethical society is only the sum of its ethical citizens. ... He argues for a spiritual awakening, one that practicing atheists, agnostics or humanists can abide, and an ethical awakening that can vitalize every common and uncommon occasion of being alive in the world today.¹²

Perhaps it is too early to assess the impact of the Dalai Lama's universalistic approach to spirituality. That he is recognized by many as an important moral and spiritual voice in today's world is beyond question. If the soaring attendance to his public lectures and the growing popularity of his books are any measure, one thing that is certain is that large numbers of the general public, especially in the West, are willing to listen to his spiritual message. His recent talk at Central Park in New York drew over 40,000 people, and he is one of the few authors who had the distinction of having two books on the *New York Times* bestseller list at the same time.¹³ His message of 'secular spiritualism', as one of his critics puts it, definitely appears to have struck a cord with millions of people in contemporary society who are yearning for some kind of spiritual meaning.



The Dalai Lama is certainly not without his share of critics. On the one side are the leaders of communist China who, on the whole, perceive his every move to be somehow directed at undermining the well-being of China. In their eyes, the Dalai Lama is not a spiritual man; rather he is an astute and therefore dangerous politician, who is capable of influencing the opinion of millions of people in the outside world. There are also the fundamentalists among the followers of other faith traditions who view the Dalai Lama's message of universal spiritualism with deep suspicion. For them, the Dalai Lama is a missionary whose primary agenda is to convert the Christian West to Buddhism.¹⁴ This is despite the fact that the Dalai Lama has repeatedly underlined his view that it is far better for individuals to remain firmly within their own inherited spiritual traditions. There are also those for whom the Dalai Lama appears to be on too intimate terms with the glamour world of Hollywood, which causes them to question his integrity and seriousness.

The inter-religious dialogue

The second area of contemporary spirituality where the Dalai Lama has made conscious efforts is the promotion of inter-religious dialogue and understanding. Thanks to the writings of the late Catholic monk Thomas Merton, we know that the Dalai Lama's interest in this area dates to his early days of exile in India in the 1960s.¹⁵ The encounter with Thomas Merton was an eye-opening experience for the Dalai Lama insofar as his perspective on Christianity is concerned. He admits that until then he felt that his own religion, Buddhism, was the best spiritual path, which, he rightly suspects, would be a fairly typical view of a religious person prior to his or her exposure to the teachings of other traditions.¹⁶ This anecdotal admission tells us something about the personal journey and nature of the evolution of the Dalai Lama's own views on the question of inter-religious understanding. His reading of world history has also made him acutely aware of the role religious diversity has often played in conflicts within human society.

Interestingly, he identifies two kinds of conflict that occur in the name of religion. The first arises simply as a result of religious diversity, while the second kind 'arises in the context of political, economic, and other factors, mainly at the institutional level'.¹⁷ The



Dalai Lama argues that inter-religious harmony and understanding is the key to overcoming the conflicts of the first, namely those that arise due to religious differences. Here he identifies, among others, ignorance of the value of other religious traditions to be one of the primary obstacles. Furthermore, today's complex, interconnected and interdependent world makes it imperative to have some appreciation of the existence of faith traditions other than one's own. As he puts it, 'whether we like it or not, most of us now experience this diversity on a daily basis.' The Dalai Lama appears to be suggesting that the idea of a homogenous society with a uniform religious faith and culture has no real basis in today's multi-faceted world. The best method by which he asserts that this ignorance of the value of other faith traditions can be overcome is through genuine dialogue between the world religions. He envisions several levels at which such dialogues could take place. The Dalai Lama writes:

Discussions among scholars in which the convergence and perhaps more importantly the divergence between the faith traditions are explored and appreciated are very valuable. On another level, it is helpful when there are encounters between ordinary but practicing followers of different religions in which each shares their experiences. This is perhaps the most effective way of appreciating others' teachings. ... I also feel that occasional meetings between religious leaders joining together to pray for a common cause are extremely useful. The gathering at Assisi in Italy in 1986, when representatives of the world's major religions gathered to pray for peace, was, I believe, tremendously beneficial to many religious believers insofar as it symbolized the solidarity and a commitment to peace of all those taking part.

Finally, I feel that the practice of members of different faith traditions going on joint pilgrimages together can be very helpful. It was in this spirit that in 1993 I went to Lourdes, and then to Jerusalem, a site holy to three of the world's great religions. I have also paid visits to various Hindu, Islamic, Jain, and Sikh shrines both in India and abroad.¹⁸

The Dalai Lama's call for greater inter-religious dialogue has been taken up seriously by some in Christian circles. Several in-depth conversations on meditation and contemplative practice of the two traditions have resulted from these encounters. One such historic encounter was the 1994 seminar entitled *The Good Heart*, which took place as the tenth annual John Main seminar in London. Organized by the World Community of Christian Meditation and



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attended largely by Christian and Buddhist practitioners, the seminar was structured around the Dalai Lama's reading of selected passages from the four Gospels. Some have hailed the book that resulted from this encounter, which carried the same title as the seminar, as 'arguably the best book on inter-religious dialogue published to date'.¹⁹ This has been followed by a joint pilgrimage of Buddhists and Christians at Bodh Gaya, the holiest site for the Buddhists, which involved joint meditation and dialogue sessions under the Bodhi tree. There have also been several joint 'retreats' between the two traditions. Most significantly, a global encounter of Buddhists and Christians on inter-religious monastic dialogue took place in 1996 at the abbey of Gethsemani, the home of the late Thomas Merton.²⁰

Throughout all these encounters, the Dalai Lama stressed the need for single-pointed commitment to the teachings of one's own faith tradition. In fact, he argues, it is on the basis of a genuine experiential conviction in the teachings of one's own tradition that one will have the basis to recognize the value of other traditions. This is perhaps analogous to the argument that without a sense of caring for oneself, the sense of caring for others simply cannot arise.

Again, it is perhaps too early to judge the impact of the Dalai Lama's efforts at promoting genuine inter-religious understanding through dialogues and establishment of closer ties. Only history will reveal the extent of his impact on the wider issue of inter-religious understanding and harmony. More difficult still is to determine to what extent these initiatives are actually taken seriously by the establishment, whether it be the Buddhist institutions or the Christian denominations. However, the fact that gatherings like the Assisi meeting, where the world's religious leaders can pray from a single platform, do take place is a significant indication of how far the world's major religions have come together. What we can do here is to examine the rationale and thinking behind the Dalai Lama's ecumenism. To begin with, how serious is his commitment to the idea of genuine pluralism in religion, which he aptly describes as the 'supermarket of world religions'? Are not the faithful, in the final analysis, constrained by their belief in the uniqueness of their own teachings as representing the sole true religion? How can the competing metaphysical claims of the different religions be reconciled? To what extent has the Dalai Lama addressed these issues that surely come in the way of forging a genuine understanding between the faith traditions?



As one can discern, almost all these questions pertain to what is known in the parlance of religious studies as the problem of 'exclusivism', namely the idea that one's own faith tradition represents the sole 'true religion'. The Dalai Lama admits that this claim for uniqueness of one's teachings is implicit in all religions. For example, he states that it is true that 'from the point of view of the individual practitioner, it is essential to maintain a single-pointed commitment to one's own faith. It is also true that this depends on the deep conviction that one's own path is the sole mediator of truth.' However, he suggests that this need not obstruct the acceptance of the plurality of paths. He thus proposes the following solution to the problem.

My way to resolve the seeming contradiction between each religion's claim to 'one truth, one religion' and the reality of the multiplicity of faiths is thus to understand that in the case of a single individual, there can indeed be only one truth, one religion. However, from the perspective of human society at large, we must accept the concept of 'many truths, many religions'. To continue with our medical analogy, in the case of one particular patient, the suitable medicine is in fact the one medicine. But clearly that does not mean that there may not be other medicines suitable to other patients.²¹

As for the problem of how to reconcile between the competing metaphysical claims, the Dalai Lama appears to dismiss it on the grounds that they are the internal business of the particular tradition.²²

Whether or not the Dalai Lama's suggested resolution of the problem of religious exclusivism contains any serious intellectual resource is something only time will tell. However, for the individual religious believer it does appear to provide a framework within which he or she can appreciate the differing contexts of two distinct perspectives. He or she can adopt the same stance as the Dalai Lama himself. According to this approach, the Dalai Lama can say, 'Buddhism represents the best path for me . . . I cannot, therefore, say that Buddhism is best for everyone.' In this way, in the Dalai Lama's view, an individual can maintain without contradiction both the standpoints of 'one truth, one religion' and 'several truths, several religions'.²³

Thus the following appear to be key points of the Dalai Lama's premise for inter-religious understanding. It is vital that the followers of the different religions are cognizant of the distinctness



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of the different faith traditions. Yet despite these differences, mainly in the field of metaphysics, there are adequate areas of convergence between the religions to work together on matters of human concern. Particularly, in the domain of ethics, the Dalai Lama feels that there is a consensus on the necessity to control the undisciplined mind that harbours selfishness and other roots of trouble, and each teaches a path leading to a spiritual state that is peaceful, disciplined, ethical and wise. Furthermore, if genuine understanding between the world's religions is established, the world's faith traditions can then play an important role in addressing many of the social, political and moral crises that humankind faces today.

Perhaps, from the point of view of a general religious believer, the Dalai Lama's message of universal spiritualism and his promotion of the value of compassion have made such spiritual ideals as meditation, prayer, silent reflection and transcendence of self-centredness a part of mainstream spiritual discipline. His teachings may also have helped the followers of non-Buddhist traditions to rediscover the insights of their own teachings, thus deepening their commitments to their own traditions. For the Buddhists, the Dalai Lama's serious engagement with the practitioners of other traditions, especially Christianity, has opened the eyes of many to an appreciation of the teachings of other traditions. Perhaps, more importantly, the simple example of the Dalai Lama's personal life may have allowed many religious practitioners to recognize the common denominators of the teachings of the world's great religious traditions, thus helping to create a greater sense of world spiritual community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has not been to examine the entire spiritual legacy of the Dalai Lama, nor has it been to assess critically the impact of the Dalai Lama's contribution to world spirituality. It is too early at this point, both in terms of time and the availability of secondary sources, to undertake these two tasks. There is also the whole issue of his personal contribution to the study and revitalization of Buddhist thought and practice in the contemporary world. Here, I have limited my task to the examination of the basic thoughts behind two important areas of the Dalai Lama's own stated



mission, namely the promotion of spiritual values and the promotion of greater inter-religious understanding.²⁴ I have also sought to shed some light on the intriguing nature of the Dalai Lama's position within the overall place of the world's religious leaders. The main purpose of developing this personal profile has been to underline the point that the Dalai Lama is perhaps not best judged as another, albeit an important, world religious leader. In terms of methodology, I have drawn extensively from my own personal experience of having been the principal interpreter to the Dalai Lama for more than fifteen years. I have also drawn heavily from the Dalai Lama's own writings. Part of the reason for taking these two sources as my primary references is the lack of any academic scholarship done on the Dalai Lama's contribution to contemporary spirituality. This may be partly due to the simple fact that the study of contemporary spirituality in religious and social contexts, which is the central theme of this collection, is still new in the academic study of religion.

Notes

1. In fact, he has dedicated an entire book to this. The Dalai Lama (1999), *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books) explores the foundations and the parameters of what a secular ethics might conceivably entail.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
3. Some of the key strands of this idea of 'human approach' were developed in a booklet, The Dalai Lama (1984), *A Human Approach to World Peace* (London: Wisdom Publications).
4. There are two autobiographies of the Dalai Lama, the first being *My Land and My People* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962) and the second entitled *Freedom in Exile* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).
5. For example, since 1987 there have been regular encounters between selected scientists and the Dalai Lama known as the *Mind and Life Dialogues* at his residence in Dharamsala, India. I have been one of the principal interpreters at these meetings.
6. The Dalai Lama (1999), 'Buddhism, Asian values and democracy', *Journal of Democracy* (November (10.1), pp. 3–7.
7. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 22.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
9. R. Bernstein (1999), 'Critic's notebook', *New York Times*, 7 October.
10. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 234.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 81.



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12. *Washington Post Book World* (12 September 1999), p. 5.
13. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, and The Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler (1999), *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Riverhead Books).
14. In his *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994) (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 85), even the Pope writes, 'He [the Dalai Lama] brings Buddhism to people of the Christian West, stirring up interest both in Buddhist spirituality and in its methods of praying.'
15. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Dimensions) pp. 100–25.
16. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 21.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
19. Huston Smith on the dust cover of His Holiness the Dalai Lama (1996), *The Good Heart: A Buddhist Perspective on the Teachings of Jesus* (Boston: Wisdom Publications).
20. Proceedings of this meeting have been published under the title, *The Gethsemani Encounter* (1999), (New York: Continuum, edited by D. W. Mitchell and J. O. S. B. Wiseman).
21. The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, p. 226.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
24. The Dalai Lama's third stated mission is his campaign for the freedom of Tibet. *Source*: Unpublished talks.



7. Carol Christ

Feminist spirituality and narrative theology

Ruth Mantin

Carol Christ's narrative of her life as spiritual journey

Carol Christ is a founder and leading representative of the fast-growing 'Goddess Movement'. She also embodies the impact of the women's movement on new understandings of spirituality. Over the past thirty years feminist spirituality has emerged as an expression of the creative transformations envisioned by feminist approaches to the study and practice of religion. One of the central claims made by Christ, and some other spiritual feminists, is that the term 'God', as it is used in established religious traditions, can no longer function as an empowering symbol of the sacred. Feminist scholars of religion argue that 'God-talk' is used to sanction patterns of domination and oppressive structures. In particular, the 'God' symbol endorses patriarchy, that is, power structures which privilege a male elite, and androcentrism, a perspective which presents maleness as normative of humanity.

As a result, Christ and others maintain that there is a need to use explicitly female imagery in order to express notions of the sacred. They are therefore turning to 'Goddess-talk'. A new term – thealogy – has emerged to distinguish these reflections on the sacred as female from the theology of 'God-talk'. Not all 'Goddess feminists' participate or necessarily agree with the process of bringing 'Goddess-talk' into the academic domain. Not all followers of the Goddess Movement are feminists. An excellent overview and analysis of the complex relationship between the diverse expressions of 'Goddess religion/spirituality' is provided by Melissa Raphael's



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book, *Introducing Theology: Discourse on the Goddess*.¹ Carol Christ occupies a distinctive place within this discourse because she is both recognized as a respected scholar in the feminist study of religion and is a leading figure in the 'popular' Goddess Movement. She has been one of the most influential writers or thinkers in the development of feminist theology.

It is difficult to separate Christ's life from her thinking because hers is a narrative theology which understands her own story as a spiritual quest. Furthermore, a central aspect of her approach is a challenge to the false dualism between 'mind' or 'spirit' and lived experience. For Christ, all spirituality and all knowledge must be understood to be 'embodied'. Because Christ's work is 'rooted in experience', she supplies a great deal of autobiographical information. As a result of her validation of the role of experience in scholarly reflection, Christ wishes to make explicit the autobiographical sources of her theories and beliefs. She is concerned to stress that her theology comes from a particular perspective – in her case that of 'a white, middle class, well educated, Californian-born feminist who has Catholic-Christian Science-Presbyterian, Northern European-American roots'.² She maintains, however, that even this description is not sufficient as it does not encompass all aspects of an affective dimension of her 'embodied knowing'. She wishes, therefore, to include such factors as 'a love for Judaism, that is part of her history, her passion for Greece, the ways in which she is moved by art, poetry and ritual, transformed by swimming in the Aegean Sea; whom she has loved and why and what drives her to despair'.³

In 'writing theology out of the story of her life', Christ reflects on the events of her childhood and on her family relationships. She uses these as sources for her understandings of the sacred and of spirituality. In her book, *Laughter of Aphrodite*, she describes her early awareness that whatever her achievements, she felt unable to compete successfully with her brothers for the unconditional approval and affection of her father. Christ also expresses the sense of isolation and awkwardness she experienced as a child and teenager because she was so tall.

She did, however, have a passion for learning which led her, in 1969, to gain a scholarship for Graduate Studies at Yale University. Her emerging theology was strongly influenced by Paul Tillich's exploration of the power of symbol and language and by his expression of the sacred as 'the ground of our being'. Christ was also



deeply affected by the relational theology and mysticism of Martin Buber. The contributions of these theologians have remained central to Christ's developing theories. She recounts, however, the difficulty she experienced in reconciling her growing feminist consciousness with most of the androcentric traditions she encountered at Yale. While she was at Yale, Christ was actively involved in the promotion of women's rights, and campaigned for the inclusion of female undergraduate students. She also initiated the formation of the 'Women and Religion Section' of the American Academy of Religion.

Christ's PhD thesis focused on the novels of Elie Wiesel. Her tutors at Yale would not accept her request to research the spirituality of women writers. In order to explore the power of narrative, she therefore turned to Wiesel's stories. She understood her focus on Wiesel's work as a natural progression from her sense of identity with the God of the Old Testament and from her love of the Hebrew prophetic literature. She states, however, that her first reading of his novel *The Gates of the Forest* was a life-changing event. For the first time, Wiesel's work brought Christ into encounter with the full horror of the Holocaust. This led Christ to a realization of Christianity's inherent anti-Judaism, precipitating her final departure from Christianity. Christ also found that many of Wiesel's images provided her with new understandings of her relationship with the sacred. Furthermore, Wiesel's reaction to his perception of God's betrayal of the Jews during the Holocaust opened up for Christ the possibility of expressing her anger at God. Throughout her narrative theology Christ draws parallels between what she calls the 'pathological' relationship with the Father God engendered by patriarchal religion with her own awareness of her conditional reliance upon male approval.

Christ's growing estrangement from the traditions, sources, language and symbolism of Christianity set her on an odyssey for alternative expressions of spirituality and the sacred. While at Yale, Christ read Doris Lessing's *The Four Gated City*. Christ describes her excitement at discovering a woman's account of a spiritual quest which spoke to her own experience. Christ began writing about Doris Lessing in 1973 and produced several articles. In these, Christ explored her reflections on the nature of spirituality revealed by Lessing's character, Martha Quest. She began to develop her theory that women's narratives, here expressed in literature, could be a source for understanding the nature of feminist spirituality.



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At the same time, Christ encountered what she later described as a 'mystical experience' which was to have a profound influence upon her. In the midst of her rage and frustration at the androcentrism of the religious and academic traditions in which she found herself, Christ heard a voice telling her that 'In God is a woman like yourself. She shares your suffering'.⁴ This initiated a pursuit of the female sacred. Christ encountered but then rejected Jungian approaches to the Goddess, critiquing them as essentialist expressions of the 'eternal feminine'. Instead, Christ found a response to her quest through her association with the emerging feminist witchcraft movement, in particular, the ideas of Starhawk and Z. Budapest. This then led her into a process of reclaiming Goddess 'herstory', that is, a view of the past which challenges the androcentric perspectives of 'history'. She was also influenced by friendships with other feminist scholars such as Naomi Goldenberg, Charlene Spretnak and Hallie Iglehart and by the material presented by *WomanSpirit* magazine. Christ developed her ideas in dialogue with the women in the 'Women and Religion Section' of the American Academy of Religion. She drew on the theories of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Mary Daly.

Christ also acknowledges her debt to the work of Marija Gimbutas. Gimbutas was a feminist archaeologist whose discoveries convinced her that the symbols appearing on artefacts dating from palaeolithic and neolithic eras were not mere decoration but the 'language of the Goddess'. She argued that the serpents, spirals, circles and coils conveyed a reverence for the energy inherent in 'the process of becoming'. This respect for the cycle of birth, life, death and regeneration also meant a respect for the connectedness of all forms of life. Gimbutas argued that this 'archeomythological' evidence indicated a 'civilization of the Goddess', situated in what Gimbutas termed 'Old Europe'. This culture was, she claimed, matrifocal, peaceful and egalitarian. It was destroyed by the invasion of Indo-European or 'Kurgan' warriors. These brought the dualistic worship of their sky gods and patriarchal oppression. Gimbutas, who died in 1994, is regarded as a 'grandmother' of the Goddess Movement, and her work has been challenged by some as an uncritical use of evidence. Christ, however, is convinced of the validity of Gimbutas' theories. For Christ, Goddess herstory helped to fill the void left by sacred stories which had been lost when she abandoned the biblical tradition and traced the path of 'heretics and



outsiders'. Christ wished to reclaim stories through which to articulate her own experience and spiritual quest, while maintaining that the non-literate 'texts' of Goddess religion are not normative for her in the way that scripture is for the followers of patriarchal traditions.

In 1978 Christ gave the keynote address at one of the first theological conferences, 'The Great Goddess Re-emerging' at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This paper was published as 'Why women need the Goddess: phenomenological, psychological and political reflections'.⁵ This was followed, in 1980, by her first book, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*. In this book she analysed the work of Doris Lessing, along with other texts by Kate Chopin, Margaret Atwood, Adrienne Rich and Ntosake Shange. Christ understood the personal and political issues explored by these women as spiritual quests. Christ did this by providing an interpretive model which expressed the spiritual process in terms of Nothingness, Awakening, Insight and New Naming. In doing so, Christ made a distinctive contribution to the study of religious experience. The ground-breaking nature of this book was reflected in the suggestion by her friend and fellow feminist thinker, Naomi Goldenberg, that fiction and poetry written by women might become the 'sacred text' of a new (feminist) consciousness.⁶

These important contributions to the feminist study of religion eventually earned Christ a professorship at San José and the academic recognition she then craved. She discovered, however, that such approval did not bring the fulfilment she was seeking. She found it increasingly difficult to reconcile her way of life with her sense of relation to nature. She also realized that her understanding of thealogy was moving her further and further away from conventional understandings of the study of religion. This was further confirmed when she was invited to go to Amsterdam and explore the themes of *Diving Deep* with students there. The students' responses generated the release of their *own* stories. Christ expresses, in the second edition of *Diving Deep*, the far-reaching impact this had on her and the importance it represented for her understanding of both feminist spirituality and feminist methodology.⁷ As a result, Christ began to use *Diving Deep* as a catalyst for encouraging women to 'hear one another into speech'.⁸ This process prompted Christ to include autobiography in her own thealogy. These



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reflections upon the implications of the process of storytelling and thealogy led her to find new understandings of the nature of spirituality and also set her upon the path which led her out of the 'malestream' academy.

When Christ went to Lesbos in response to a request in 1981 to work during the summer at the Aegean (now International) Women's Studies Institute, a new and crucial stage in her spiritual odyssey began. Out of her search for a spirituality rooted both in the experience of women's lives and in a celebration of the physical world grows her understanding of the Goddess documented in *The Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess*. This book represents Christ's first attempt to incorporate autobiography into her thealogy. It celebrates the power of symbol and story, and charts Christ's movement out of patriarchal religion and scholarship.

Christ also describes how she felt drawn – against her will – to the Greek goddesses and found herself identifying with Aphrodite. Her Aphrodite was, however, one reclaimed from pre-patriarchal traditions who represents for Christ the independent female and sexual self, integrating independence and eros. Christ had searched for such an expression of female self in the narratives of *Diving Deep* but, ultimately, could not find it. Christ gives an account of her 'initiation' as priestess of Aphrodite and describes her work with other women to revise Goddess rituals, in particular the enactment of the Eleusinian Mysteries which she believes were centred on the myth of Demeter and Persephone. In Greece, Christ felt that she was nurturing the intuitions which resourced her thealogy. She found it increasingly difficult to return to the USA. She was also struggling with the contradictions between her commitment to experience-based, embodied thinking and the requirements of the patriarchal academic systems within which she worked. Furthermore, she felt increasingly alienated and betrayed by American feminist scholars of religion who disparaged studies based on the reclaiming of the Goddess. Christ resigned her professorship and moved permanently to Greece, and cites as another reason for her move the breakup of her marriage. This comes as something of a shock, because nowhere in her autobiography does she mention getting married. Her husband Roger is mentioned only once, in passing. So many intimate details of Christ's life are recounted as revelatory in her narrative thealogy but her marriage does not function as a significant



experience in this way. The failure of this relationship does, however, contribute to her increasing sense that she is being engulfed by nothingness. Neither the move to Greece nor the laughter of Aphrodite are able to generate an awakening out of this state. Christ then had to face the death of her mother, and this set her upon a journey into what she later identified as her dark night of the soul recounted in *Odyssey with the Goddess*.

In the preface to *Odyssey*, Christ finds it necessary to provide a justification of the book's 'boundary-breaking of genre'.⁹ It represents a new stage in her narrative theology which Christ compares with the autobiographical theology of Augustine's *Confessions*. She is anxious to affirm that *her* story, like his, must be 'incomplete' in that it comes from only one perspective.¹⁰

In *Odyssey*, Christ's style is intensely personal, and with remarkable openness and honesty she exposes the minute details of her life to analysis and reflection. She understands such autobiographical narrative to be necessary in order to express her notion of embodied spirituality. In justification of such an approach, she wrote:

For me the most meaningful mode of writing feminist theology is to tell stories in such a way that we confront the sources of our despair and name anew the great powers that give shape and meaning to our lives. . . . Many of us are telling stories because there is no other way for us to express the new visions of the sacred that emerge as we heal the trauma of having been closed in silence for so long.¹¹

In *Odyssey*, Christ's story is of pilgrimage. She gives an account of the first time she organized a Goddess pilgrimage in Crete while also reflecting upon her own spiritual odyssey. Her mother's death and the failure of a disastrous love affair which she originally thought had been 'sent by Aphrodite' forced Christ to face her 'self-hater' in the form of suicidal tendencies which spoke to her of her inability to be loved. She was also prompted to express the anger she once directed towards the Father God against a Goddess whom she perceived as having abandoned and betrayed her. Christ's odyssey through these experiences towards a new transformation is described in the story of her pilgrimages in Crete. This story reveals the importance of ritual and sacred place in Christ's Goddess spirituality and of a community of women engaged in mutual empowerment.

Against this background Christ reveals the details of her own story with breath-taking openness. With characteristic honesty, she describes



the response of an editor to an earlier manuscript as 'leaving a bad taste in her mouth' because she could see better than the writer of the story what was going to happen, i.e. the affair with her lover, Nikos, was going to end. These are, however, risks that Christ is prepared to take in order to engage in embodied thinking. This is process narrative theology. At a later stage of her reflections Christ understands these experiences very differently. Through an account of the details of the events following her mother's death, she does, however, reach an analysis of the roots of her sense of despair and, through this new naming, finds a spiritual transformation. The relationship with her father and the process of leading the pilgrimage made her recognize her conditioned need to be in control despite her theoretical acceptance of flux and finitude. She understands the experience of the death of her mother to have revealed to her the mystery of love.

At the end of the literal pilgrimage, Christ had a physical and emotional breakdown from which she emerged into a Rebirth symbolized by her descent into the deepest level of the Skoteino cave in Crete where she again 'heard' the Goddess. She now felt able to reassess her relationships and to resist the voice that spoke of despair and suicide. She had been initiated into an Eleusinian mystery of love and could emerge from the underworld to a rebirth of the Goddess.

As a result of her descent and return, Christ felt able to produce her book, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. In this, she attempts to provide a systematic theology. Christ struggled with this project for several years before its eventual completion. She believes that only after she had been through the 'dark night of the soul' – narrated in *Odyssey* – could she emerge to complete the task. *Rebirth* addresses the traditional areas of classical theology – e.g. metaphysics, anthropology, eschatology – from a perspective which challenges the androcentric, kyriocentric and anthropocentric assumptions of malestream scholarship. *Rebirth* can also be seen as a defence of Goddess religion presented to its 'cultured despisers'. The preface lists some of the questions generated by attempts to present 'Goddess' as a meaningful symbol for contemporary spirituality. Christ claims to answer them all but acknowledges that 'answering' might mean changing the question – once it is appreciated that we need to challenge some of the 'most deeply held and unrecognised assumptions of our culture'.¹²

For Christ, 'Rebirth' is an experiment in 'fully embodied thinking', the next step in her quest to integrate scholarly reflection



and experience. Christ wishes to 'find meaning in feminist spirituality' but acknowledges the difficulty in producing a 'systematic thealogy' – which is true to the centrality of experience.

CENTRAL THEMES IN CAROL CHRIST'S THEALOGY

The central role of women's experience in feminist spiritualities is one of the most distinctive features of Christ's contribution to the development of feminist theo/alogy and has influenced the method as well as the content of her writing. She has frequently identified this emphasis, claiming that

Each of my academic interests – from my studies of the poetry of the prophets to my work on the narrative theology of Elie Wiesel, to my analysis of the women's spiritual quest in the poetry and prose of contemporary women, to my attempts to integrate thealogy and experience in my own work – has reflected my interest in forms of religious expression that are connected to experience.¹³

Earlier in her academic career, when Christ identified the sources of her theo/alogy, she explained that her work was 'rooted in experience' and 'nourished by two intuitions'. These were, first, that 'the earth is holy and our true home', and second, that 'women's experience, like all experience, is a source for insight about the divine'.¹⁴ For Christ, the need to counter the dualistic and androcentric assumptions which had determined patriarchal religions made it necessary to turn to Goddess symbolism. These two themes run throughout Christ's work and are interrelated. Informed by her own instinctive sense of relation with the 'natural world', by her study of classical Greek philosophy and drawing on the analysis of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Christ explores the challenge of feminist theo/alogy to the dualistic paradigm adopted by an emerging Christianity. Christ therefore rejects a Platonic longing for a flight from the material world which is inextricably linked with a gynophobic revulsion of the female body. Her affirmation of the immanence of the sacred within nature is also an acceptance of the 'flux and finitude of life'. This, in turn, relates to a plea for an understanding of spirituality which is 'embodied' and which can be explored through the experiences and stories of the women who have been on the 'underside' of a dualistic worldview.



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This is therefore linked to her second intuition – that women’s experience is a source of and resource for theo/alogical reflection. Christ explored this theme in her first book, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*. In revisioning what women’s experience might contribute to an expression of mysticism, Christ drew on the definitive contributions of James and Underhill. In doing so, however, she was also constructing a critique of the dualistic assumptions underlying their definitions. Christ challenged the view that ‘nature mysticism’ must be inferior to a sense of union with the transcendent. Instead, she argued that the sense of relation with nature expressed in the women’s literature she was exploring reflected a connection with and grounding in ‘the great powers’. Christ linked this understanding of mysticism with a growing sense of ‘authentic selfhood’ experienced by women through their involvement in political movements which are ‘quests for truth or justice or being’ which in turn are ‘rooted in the power of being’.¹⁵ Influenced by the themes of Mary Daly, Christ related the mystical state of nothingness – ‘the dark night of the soul’ – to women’s sense of non-being in an androcentric world. She provided an image of ‘awakening’ which countered the conversion paradigm of patriarchal religious systems. Christ understood as spirituality women’s quest for authentic self-hood. She argued that in order to express their experience of ‘social mysticism’, women needed a ‘New Naming’ to create new possibilities of being and living. Christ was aware of the problematic nature of some of the claims she was trying to make, even as she made them. She had to defend herself against the charge of an inappropriate imposition upon the texts of an expression of spirituality while also arguing for a relevance to socio/political transformation. Christ was drawing on texts which would not have been previously recognized as sources for spirituality. She was using women’s writings in a new way.

For Christ, there must be a sense of connection between experience, story and spirituality. This central tenet of Christ’s work has led her to participate in debates about the issues raised by an uncritical use of ‘women’s experience’ as a category. A critique that Christ is willing to make of her earlier work is that her emphasis on ‘women’s experience’ had conveyed a false universalism. She acknowledged that she had treated women’s experience as if it were a Platonic ideal.¹⁶ In the preface provided in the second edition of *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, she writes:



Though our sources for the most part reflected white, North American or European, twentieth-century middle-class women's experiences, we wrote as if women's experiences were undifferentiated and universal. . . . If I were writing *Diving Deep* now, I would be less global in generalizing about women's experiences and I would not feel the need to justify the inclusion of lesbian and Black women's experiences to the white heterosexual reader.¹⁷

Christ's recognition of this flaw in her presentation of women's experience was prompted by the voices of women who were not being included in this apparently 'universal' category. Black women, women of colour, women from the majority world wanted to affirm that there are differences which make a difference. Christ addressed this issue in the introduction to *Weaving the Visions*, a collection of 'new patterns in feminist spirituality' which Christ co-edited with Judith Plaskow. Here she wrote:

If we wish to speak of and act on the commonalties that link women together, to discover where our joint interests lie in vision and in struggle, we must do so on the basis of long and careful listening to the pains and satisfactions of many women's lives. The full reality of 'women's experience' is contained not in one but in the rising chorus that speaks from many standpoints, pressing toward the creation of society in which all can be heard.¹⁸

Christ also links the need to acknowledge difference and diversity within women's experience with the need to challenge the concept of 'objectivity' in scholarship. She emphasizes the importance of using personal stories in academic reflection and spiritual quest. She maintains that being explicit about the personal sources of their work ensures that feminists will be less likely to make false generalizations.¹⁹ This she calls a methodology of empathy.

Christ links her methodology of empathy with her challenge to the 'myth' and 'ethos' of objectivity in malestream scholarship. She insists that her focus in experience does not 'reduce' theology to autobiography or solipsism. For her, the way out of solipsism is not objectivity but empathy. Christ maintains that when she found theory 'a dead end', the only way out was to bridge the gap between experience and theory by turning to story.²⁰

This concern and her reflections upon the central role of experience in her theology has led to her to concentrate upon the shift of paradigm in the academy necessitated by feminist challenges



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to androcentric assumptions and false dualisms. Christ calls for the need to 'lift the veil of androcentrism' which disguises the fact that so-called 'neutral' approaches assume a justification of patriarchal attitudes. She illustrates her argument with a convincing and influential critique of the androcentric assumptions underlying the celebrated and foundational work of Mircea Eliade.²¹ Christ exposes the presuppositions informing Eliade's definition of a sense of the sacred as a grasp of the difference between that which reveals itself as 'real and meaningful' as opposed to 'the chaotic and dangerous flux of things'. She then illustrates the selective nature of Eliade's analysis of expressions of pre-literate religions in the light of such predispositions.

For Christ, a 'sense of the sacred' is expressed through her relationship to the Goddess. Her argument for 'Goddess-talk' developed out of her recognition of the importance of language and symbol. She first expressed this in her influential article, 'Why women need the Goddess'. Here Christ draws on Geertz's identification of the moods and motivations generated by religions' long-lasting symbols to argue for the psychological and political necessity of goddess imagery. She argues that religious symbolic systems will not 'tolerate a vacuum'. Only the affirmation of female will, bodiliness and relationships in the conscious application of Goddess language will prevent the unconscious return to patterns of domination sanctioned by the pervasive power of God's patriarchal symbolism.

When exploring the need for Goddess symbolism, Christ was content to accept a very fluid definition of what 'the Goddess might mean'. She quoted with approval the view of Starhawk, an influential writer and thinker in feminist spirituality. Starhawk maintained that whether the Goddess was a separate being, natural energy or a symbol of her own power depended on 'how she was feeling'.²² As Christ's own 'odyssey' has continued, however, she has become more certain of the reality of the Goddess as 'a personal presence' with whom she has a relationship. In claiming this, however, Christ does not want to abandon an understanding of the Goddess as 'fully immanent' and embodied in the material, finite world.

In *Rebirth of the Goddess*, she offers her vision of what this might mean:



The Goddess is the power of intelligent, embodied love that is the ground of all being. The earth is the body of the Goddess. All beings are interdependent in the web of life. Nature is intelligent, alive and aware. As part of nature, human beings are relational, embodied, and interdependent. The basis of ethics is the feeling of deep connection to all people and all beings in the web of life. The symbols and rituals of Goddess religion bring these values to consciousness and help us build communities in which we can create a more just, peaceful, and harmonious world.²³

Christ challenges the dualistic assumptions of presenting as mutually exclusive such alternatives as Immanent/Transcendent, Theism/Pantheism. To do so, she draws on the insights of process theology. This allows her to understand the Goddess as fully immanent in the world yet also transcending it in the sense that an organism is 'more' than a collection of cells or the mind is 'more' than a collection of chemical reactions.²⁴

In a similar way, Christ also challenges what she regards as a false dualism between polytheism and monotheism. She is aware of the oppressive tendencies inherent in a monotheistic paradigm. She recognizes, therefore, the emphasis that theologians such as Christine Downing put upon the need to celebrate a multiplicity of Goddesses. Christ wishes to embrace this diversity but is also anxious to affirm an 'intuition of unity underlying the multiplicity of life'. Christ relates this intuition of unity to her focus on the 'web of life' as the relational, interdependent connection between all living beings.

THE IMPLICATIONS AND INFLUENCE OF CHRIST'S FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Christ has had an enormous influence on the development of feminist theology. Her article 'Why women need the Goddess' continues to be widely regarded as a 'seminal',²⁵ 'classic'²⁶ and 'ground-breaking'²⁷ text in the development of the feminist study and practice of religion. Indeed, it is now regarded as 'foundational' to the Goddess Movement.²⁸

The ground-breaking nature of Christ's attempt to express women's literature as 'sources' of spirituality is easy to overlook since the exercise is now so familiar in spiritual feminism. Her achievement, however, was that 'in a unique way' she 'made women's mystical experience and aesthetic sensibilities the stuff of



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religious reflection'.²⁹ *Diving Deep and Surfacing* provided patterns and methodologies followed by or reflected upon by many feminist and womanist theo/alogians in their approach to women's literature as spiritual journey. The two collections she co-authored with Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising* and *Weaving the Visions*, hold unrivalled positions as points of reference for an understanding of the birth and growth of contemporary feminist theo/alogies. Christ's major contribution to the emergence of spiritual feminism has been acknowledged by recent attempts to analyse some of its implications. When considering what might be the repercussions involved in *When God Becomes Goddess*,³⁰ Richard Grigg surveyed the work of Christ alongside that of Ruether and Daly. Likewise, when Kathleen Sands considered the implications of spiritual feminism's *Escape from Paradise*,³¹ the work of Carol Christ was central to her exploration. Christ's analysis of the impact of feminist methodologies upon the study of religion has also become the starting point for further explorations of the relationship between religion and gender. In providing a 'systematic thealogy', Christ has attempted to move Goddess-talk into the arena of scholarly reflection. She has also carefully explored the ethical implications of a thealogical world-view. She maintains that such an exploration must be open to the conditionality and ambiguity of life. She suggests 'touchstones' rather than commandments.³² For Christ, thealogical feminist spirituality, as she finds meaning in it, is quite distinct from New Age perspectives and from feminist witchcraft.

Carol Christ is therefore a very important spokesperson for the emerging women's spirituality movement. As Ursula King has so effectively illustrated, the women's movement has made a distinctive contribution to understandings of what contemporary spiritualities might entail.³³ The application of feminist analysis to the dualistic assumptions underlying traditional expressions of spirituality has opened up new, creative and enabling possibilities. In classical dualism, the body/spirit divide has been expressed in gendered language. Such imagery placed the female firmly on the 'underside' of a dualistic framework, along with sexuality, irrationality and the material world in all its dark, finite transience. As a result, women can now offer a distinctive and 'prophetic' voice in the critique of such a dualistic framework. They can also offer the promise of spiritualities which reclaim and affirm those aspects denied and demonized by dualism. Furthermore, they can explore post-dualistic



expressions of spirituality which are connected, holistic and relational. By bringing spirituality firmly within the realm of present, material, embodied experience, feminist theo/alogians also underline its socio/political dimension. Dualistic frameworks provide the ideal pattern for oppressive structures. They are constructed upon the notion of the 'absolute' and the 'other'. This allows those in power, who identify themselves as 'absolute', to project on to the 'other' all the negative aspects of a dualistic perspective. In the process, the 'other' can then be demonized, dehumanized and, if necessary, destroyed. The relationship between these ideas is expressed in the maxim of feminist spirituality, 'the personal is political, is spiritual'.

As Carol Christ has illustrated, another important aspect of feminist theo/alogy is its recognition of the relationship between narrative, knowledge and power. The symbols and language which express the sources and effects of spirituality have enormous potency, even for those who do not consciously regard themselves as religious. Christ and other feminist theologians are convinced that the socio/spiritual transformations they desire will not emerge until explicitly female 'Goddess-talk' can be used to express the sacred. In pursuing these transformations, Christ is contributing to the debates surrounding the possible meaning of 'spirituality' in a contemporary, postmodern world.

Christ has entered into debate with feminist theologians who wish to accept more fully the relativity and plurality of postmodern conditions. Christ's response has been to argue that feminists need to 'embrace the ambiguity of conditional but not absolute acceptance of the modern *and* postmodern frameworks'. The main lesson, she argues, that the 'detached abstractionalism' of both the Enlightenment and postmodernism should present to feminists is the need for them to become '*more* embodied not *disembodied*' in their theologies.³⁴ Christ recognizes that one of the thinkers who influenced her theology, Nelle Morton, understood Goddess-talk as a means to move into a post-metaphysical spirituality.³⁵ For Morton, Goddess set in motion a metaphoric movement. The role of Goddess in this movement was 'to make herself dispensable'. Morton feared that, unless this metaphoric movement was recognized, Goddess religion would result only in the sex-change of the head of a hierarchical structure which determined the social imaginary. In *Rebirth*, however, Christ explicitly declines to follow



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the trajectory of this metaphoric movement because her own experience validated the personal presence of the Goddess.³⁶

Kathleen Sands, while respecting Christ's contribution to feminist theo/alogy, is concerned about her notion of a single or ideal whole which lies beyond women's diverse experiences.³⁷ For Sands, this suggests that Christ 'still dreams of the oneness that has entranced Western rationalism'.³⁸ It has also been argued that Christ's presentation of the 'wholeness' towards which women's quests are directed and her notion of an 'ultimate destination' for multiple and disparate feminist journeys are problematic for feminists who are questioning the value of a 'nostalgia for an authentic self'.³⁹ It could, however, be argued that Christ's emphasis on a narrative spirituality which is embodied in each individual's journey of experience relates to the concerns of postmodern feminists who are exploring the spiritual potential of 'subjectivity in process'. Christ is contributing to contemporary negotiations about the boundaries of 'spirituality' in her 'continuing effort to write thealogy out of the stories of our lives'.⁴⁰

Notes

1. M. Raphael (1999), *Introducing Thealogy: Discourse on the Goddess* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press).
2. C. Christ (1987), *The Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row), p. xiii.
3. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
5. C. Christ (1978), 'Why women need the goddess: phenomenological, psychological and political reflections, *Heresies* (spring) reprinted in C. Christ and J. Plaskow (1979, 1989), *Womanspirit Rising: A Reader in Feminist Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row), pp. 273–87.
6. N. Goldenberg (1979), *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press).
7. C. Christ (1986), *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, 2nd edn (Boston: Beacon Press), p. xv.
8. N. Morton (1985), *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press).
9. C. Christ (1995), *Odyssey with the Goddess: A Spiritual Quest in Crete* (New York: Continuum), p. 1.



10. Kathleen Sands, in her survey of Christ's work before *Odyssey*, had already made this comparison and noted that Augustine's autobiographical approach, unlike that of contemporary feminists, never counted much against his credibility!
11. Christ, *Odyssey with the Goddess*, pp. 138–9.
12. C. Christ (1997), *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (New York and London: Routledge), p. xiv.
13. Christ, *Odyssey with the Goddess*, p. 1.
14. Christ, *The Laughter of Aphrodite*, p. ix; Christ, *Odyssey with the Goddess*, p. 120.
15. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, p. 23.
16. C. Christ and J. Plaskow (1989), *Womanspirit Rising: A Reader in Feminist Religion*, (2nd edn) (Harper & Row), p. 3.
17. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (2nd edn, 1986), p. xii.
18. J. Plaskow and C. Christ (1989), *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins), p. 4.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 5
20. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, p. 2.
21. C. Christ (1991), 'Mircea Eliade and the feminist paradigm shift', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* (7.2), pp. 75–94.
22. Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, pp. 278–9.
23. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. xv.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
25. A. Long (1994), 'The Goddess Movement in Britain', *Feminist Theology* (No. 5), pp. 11–39.
26. P. Lunn (1993), 'Do women need the Goddess?', *Feminist Theology* (No. 4) pp. 17–38.
27. M. Raphael (1996), *Theology and Embodiment* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), p. 55.
28. M. Raphael (1999), 'Monotheism in contemporary Goddess religion', in D. Sawyer and D. Collier (eds), *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), p. 146.
29. K. Sands (1994), *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), p. 115.
30. R. Grigg (1995), *When God Becomes Goddess: The Transformation of American Religion* (New York: Continuum).
31. Sands, *Escape from Paradise*.



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32. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 167. The touchstones are:
 - Nurture life
 - Walk in love and beauty
 - Trust the knowledge that comes through the body
 - Speak the truth about conflict, pain and suffering
 - Take only what you need
 - Think about the consequences of your actions for seven generations
 - Approach the taking of life with great respect
 - Practice great generosity
 - Repair the web.
33. U. King (1989), *Women and Spirituality: Voices of Protest and Promise* (London: Macmillan).
34. C. Christ (1989), 'Embodied thinking: reflections on feminist theological thinking', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* vol. 5, no. 1, p. 14.
35. Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, p. 170.
36. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, p. 104.
37. Sands, *Escape From Paradise*, pp. 124–5.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
39. R. White (1996), 'Coming home? Spirituality and feminist fictions' (unpublished paper), *Fallen Angels: Twentieth Century Representations of Women's Spirituality* (Southampton: LSU College of Higher Education).
40. Christ, *The Laughter of Aphrodite*, p. 11.



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Part II

Faith Communities

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8. Faith communities

Spiritual diversity, hope and tension in the modern world

Clive Erricker

Spirituality, community and virtue

Spiritual life is embedded in community. The creation and preservation of community in the modern world is often only achieved with difficulty. Despite our capacity for increasing global communication, the quality of that communication is dependent on more than the material or virtual capacity instrumental to its achievement. These studies illustrate this point in a number of ways. Community is dependent on location. By this, I mean that virtual communication is no substitute for relational engagement of a more physical or sensory kind. Spiritually, this amounts to a sense of routine or liturgical fellowship – a sense of real presence and support, a striving together towards a common purpose which, at a spiritual level, mitigates against the vicissitudes of experience, of suffering and loss and, religiously speaking, recognizes something beyond or transcending them.

This collection of studies is a representation of diversity. This diversity extends across culture and religion. It is also a teleological diversity at a spiritual level, since each religious community studied places upon the world a different template, or design, in expressing the spiritual purpose of human existence. The purpose of the last chapter is an enquiry into what succeeds such a template when the overtly religious context is removed and replaced by an apparently secular environment. However, at the heart of all these communities is a concern with human dignity. Tzvetan Todorov, in his study of moral life in the concentration camps, describes dignity as ‘the first



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ordinary virtue, and it simply means the capacity of the individual to remain a subject with a will: that fact, by itself, is enough to ensure membership of the human race'.¹

This dignity is preserved by ownership of a particular identity contextualized in the narrative of a tradition, in other words, a sense of belonging that brings with it the responsibilities of allegiance. The first of these can be identified as caring. To quote Todorov again: 'This further requirement of virtuous acts, that they not only demonstrate the dignity of their authors but also contribute to the welfare of others, might be called *caring*.'²

However, who is worthy of our care, how people become worthy of our care, and what form our caring takes depends on the community in question. Such issues are at the heart of how we conceive of our humanity and how that conception is preserved in the future. Thus, on this matter, communities can become divided from one another and such division can end in conflict. The larger question, then, is how we can live with difference, since difference is both inevitable and potentially damaging. The communities studied have different ways of answering this question, and this is part of the fascination of such studies. In part, the answers derive from issues of exclusivity and inclusivity, and these in turn are related to questions of truth and the principles on which specific lifestyles are based and maintained. For example, the Amish, at one end of our spectrum, maintain their way of life by rejecting the influence of the outside world. The Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries and the African American Pentecostal Church mark out their territories with the cultural and religious identification within their titles, but both understand themselves to be spiritually a part of larger respective Islamic and Christian groupings. ISKCON and the Thai Buddhist Forest Retreat Order seek to influence the wider society in various ways with differing anti-materialist teachings but from a monastic presence, the former doing so in a more evangelical manner and the latter through the reciprocal relationship with a lay community. The Taizé Community seeks ecumenical reconciliation, based on contemplative prayer and a presence among the poor.

In these studies we are presented with diverse communities seeking to maintain a sense of spiritual purpose within a world that is subject to increasingly rapid cultural change. The inclusion of the word 'culture' here alerts us to further complexity. Its range of uses has shifted with historical changes in our own awareness of what it



means to be human, to progress, to be civilized, and so on. Terry Eagleton analyses these etymological shifts in some detail.³ Significantly, the term is open to both descriptive and normative use. If we affirm the former, and accept the idea of a plurality of cultures, or even cultural plurality,⁴ this does not mean that we take a neutral stance, but that we oppose a hierarchical distinction in relation to what constitutes culture. If we take the latter stance, contrastingly, we impose a sense of what is worthy as culture and what is not. As examples of these different stances, we may say the former is exemplified in many relativist and postmodern writings and the latter is particularly evident in nineteenth-century colonial understandings. The different uses of the term 'culture' are closely related to our spiritual and moral positions, and, by extension, our notion of community. Thus we turn full circle. For the communities represented in this selection of studies, the question is how to affirm a truth that does not collapse into sheer relativity and yet does not result in outright conflict. They seek to do this in differing ways.

Given these tensions, it is not surprising that religious communities can be wary of representation of themselves by those who belong to the wider culture. These can include both journalists and academics.⁵ Problems of representation are well documented in the literature of social anthropology and cultural theory.⁶ The writers of the studies in this section have been sensitive to this issue, and especially to the construct of 'otherness', the identification of an alien culture that is represented from within the worldview and according to the values of a more powerful agent or group. In fact, it is one of the aims of this collection to attempt to represent each community on its own terms. In taking this approach we are aware of the problematics of interpretation and of the need not to idealize the reality. To facilitate this approach the source material used is primarily that produced by the communities themselves and interviews with members of those communities. All these studies are located in the West: in either Europe or North America, but they also reach out into other countries by virtue of past and present links within the different movements and groups. This alerts us to one of the features of globalization, that it can unsettle the stability of established communities. In the case of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries, this is apparent in the creation of their diaspora. In the case of the African American Pentecostals, this is apparent in the historical shift from Africa to America. In both cases, these communities identify



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persecution as a significant feature in their tradition. However, globalization can also work the other way, in establishing a presence and influence in new cultures. Here we can refer to the emergence of a Buddhist and a Hindu presence in the West in monastic forms: the Forest Retreat Order and ISKCON. The patterning of these changes in location and reasons for them can be complex and bound up in the history of political change, colonization and decolonization – the history of modernity. This is addressed further in the particular studies, to a brief outline of which we now turn.

The studies

The Thai Buddhist Forest Retreat Order is one of the most significant and influential Buddhist movements to have translated itself from Asia to the West. Initiated by the late Ajahn Chah, it was part of Buddhist revivalism within Theravada Buddhism in Thailand in the twentieth century. The attraction to Ajahn Chah's teaching of young Westerners resulted in a specific monastery established for them in northeast Thailand. Its Abbott, Venerable Sumedho, then became head of the Order as it established itself in the United Kingdom, and subsequently in Europe, the Antipodes and the United States. My attention in this study is focused on the nature of the teachings and practice, its attraction for Western converts to the monastic life and lay followers, and the degree to which it is adapting in its migration from Thai to Western culture. Its uniqueness lies in an adherence to traditional practices, which are anachronistic in its new host environment, in particular, a maintenance of strict adherence to the vinaya (monastic code of discipline), including the observance of the alms round in a context in which it was completely misunderstood. In addition, the radical nature of its teachings questions the underlying assumptions of Western rationalism and modernist notions of progress. Relying both on donations for financial survival and on an invitation to establish a monastic presence, it represents a system of values antithetical to mainstream Western society, and yet it flourishes. It has also established an order of nuns committed to the discipline of monastic life, drawn from Western converts that had declined in Thailand.

Anna King, in her examination of the ISKCON movement,



identifies its transitional character as a significant factor. She begins by relating its improbable inception when Prabhupāda, at age 69, sailed from India and arrived penniless in New York. The attraction of the young to an ageing Indian spiritual teacher who demanded vows of abstinence is bound up in the story of the culture of the late 1960s, the hippies and the summer of love, and an enchantment with Eastern spirituality. It was not easy, even for his early followers, fully to understand the spiritual import of Prabhupāda's teachings. The high profile the movement achieved by their ecstatic presence in London's Oxford Street, a mall dedicated to materialism, was not understood as an act of purification – bringing God's presence into the secular world. Much less was it recognized as a re-enactment of a sixteenth-century Vaiṣṇava saint's spiritual practice in the streets of Bengal. The missionary zeal of the movement was generally interpreted as brainwashing.⁷ King relates how ISKCON survived the death of its founder and moved towards increasing institutionalization, and a congregational membership. It has survived the threat of the closure of Bhaktivedanta Manor as its increasing popularity with the wider Hindu population, especially at major festivals, brought large numbers of worshippers. There was also the failure of some of the gurus appointed by its founder. King sees these vicissitudes as the necessary experiences of a movement moving towards spiritual maturity.

In contrast to the missionary inspiration of ISKCON, its youthfulness as a movement and its Indian origins, Richard Stevick takes us into a religious culture that is far happier in isolation from its surrounding culture, and whose roots can be traced back to the Reformation and the emergence of the Anabaptists. Stevick suggests that the Amish 'are probably North America's best known Christian minority'.⁸ Ironically, in an attraction of opposites, this has arisen due to Hollywood's and the media's fascination with a community that rejects its own values. The Amish, as Stevick makes clear, are no strangers to criticism from outside or dissent within. Other fundamentalist Christians see the Amish practice as 'legalistic', and their beliefs and attitudes as arrogant. Internally, New Order Amish criticize Old Order Amish, especially over their attitude towards Amish youth. The history of the Amish, dating back to the Anabaptist dissenters, is a catalogue of division and martyrdom, resulting in their extinction in Europe and yet persistent survival, and even growth, in North America. Distinctiveness in appearance is



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matched by distinctiveness in lifestyle. As Stevick remarks, it is not just a geographical territory they mark out with their communities; attending a three-hour Amish service is like travelling back in time to a different age. In this sense of backward time travel, one becomes aware of the Amish rejection of modern ideas of progress.

David Daniels' study of African American Pentecostalism reminds us that the spiritual influences on and within North American society vary according to their origins, even when they share the same religious epithet, in this case Christian. If the Amish are an example of a puritan presence, here we consider the African influence of charismatic Pentecostalism: the Church of God in Christ. Drawing upon the experience of slavery and beyond, salvation is sought through deliverance, purging and cleansing as the seeker encounters God in the spiritual practice of tarrying. Tarrying can also be seen as a rejection of the imposition of bourgeois sensibilities and liturgical forms within the development of North American society – a refusal to assent to the influence of the European Enlightenment upon social expectations of 'rational' religion. In making clear the importance of dissenting practice in worship as a means to establishing a sense of spiritual identity, Daniels speaks of the 'ring-shout' as a counter to the 'privileging of orderliness, quiet, solemnity and control'.⁹ Theologically, tarrying is understood and justified as a means of communion with God by the Pentecost event, 'tarrying' being the preferred translation rather than the more mundane 'waiting' on God. As Daniels points out, the context in which tarrying takes on meaning is also a rejection of First World Western values. It is about perceiving oneself in a situation of scarcity, as being in need, rather than in a situation of abundance and mastery. Thus to consider the spiritual practice of tarrying is to become conscious of the political context in which it takes place. Waiting on God leads to the contemplation of global values, social action and questions of justice.

Liam Gearon's enquiry into Taizé as a global and post-colonial theology of community provides a similar focus on the relationship between spiritual practice and social responsibility, but from a very different historical and cultural perspective. While the orientation of Taizé is toward the global, its geographical location is most obviously European, specifically in the hills of Burgundy. Its purpose is reconciliation and its membership ecumenical, extending beyond just Christian denominations. Gearon points to the way in which



Taizé synthesizes from elements in different Christian traditions to create a distinctly contemplative liturgy, the power of which resides in the deep silences between the evocative chants and litanies. The liturgy also has the effect of dissolving time through, for example, creating an environment within the Church of Reconciliation that suspends one's connection with the outside world. Gearon remarks, 'When inside the tightly sealed doors, it is difficult to differentiate fully day from night.'¹⁰ It is this liturgy that touches the heart in a profound way, akin to Bhakti in the Hindu tradition and in many ways reminiscent of Orthodox Christian liturgy. This call to love is translated into action through the dispersal of the brothers living among the poor across continents and giving their efforts in the context of those communities. In these twin ways, of contemplation and action in the world, Gearon points to Taizé's commitment to reconciliation and renewal as an integration of spiritual resources and moral activity, each depending on the other. This is supported by a common sense of solidarity in community that Gearon evokes through his personal reflections.

The Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries are distinctive in a number of ways. Perhaps the most obvious is that, in seeking to maintain their particular identity as Khoja, they are actually difficult to locate. As is quoted at the beginning of my study, you won't find them under 'M for Muslim' in the telephone directory; therefore, apart from coming across them by chance, you have to meet them before becoming aware of them. Second, their capacity for integration into the economic and educational world of their host countries is in marked contrast to their determination to be a separate community which preserves its own spiritual and religious heritage through its Jamaats and its global communication in diaspora through the world federation. Yet the complementary function of these two endeavours is the key to survival of a minority Islamic population spread across continents. Most pertinently, this ensures the continuance of the Khoja spiritual identity as Shi'a Ithnasheeries in a Western environment with contrary values. This study focuses on the means by which The Khojas have managed to come to terms with a diaspora largely resulting from post-colonial changes in East Africa in the 1960s and 1970s, which left them disempowered, disenfranchised and dispossessed. It acts as a case study contributing to the literature on minority religious groups dealing with the issues arising from migration and a first generation growing up in the West. As is



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identified in the chapter, the maintenance of identity as a spiritual and religious community is of significant importance in avoiding assimilation. This depends, in this case, on preserving a heritage rooted in allegiance to the family of the prophet and, in particular, the remembrance of the tragedy of Kerbala.

Jane Erricker's contribution deliberately seeks to contrast the study of religious communities with one that can be identified only by its specific location. As a case study of a street community, of which she is a member and therefore reports as an insider, she asks what spirituality can mean and how it is expressed in such a setting. Reflecting on increasing institutional secularization, the decline in church attendance and affiliation, she narrates the street's history through its membership. Foremost in her concerns is how relationships give expression to a communal sense of belonging, and what that belonging is dependent upon. She dwells upon the significant features relating to the street's location and design, and how these give rise to forms of conversation that are apparently mundane, but actually serve to express caring and concern. In doing so, she suggests, 'Everyday spirituality is a delicate, dynamic web of relationship which, while appearing fragile enough as to be almost unseen, is nevertheless strong enough to support a community.'¹¹ This study points to the way in which over time, in this case a central period of twenty years (a generation), there is a cyclical process of change in which the spirit of community and its values have to be handed on and evolve as residents and roles change. In this process, Jane Erricker alludes to the larger question of citizenship to which it relates.

Future prospects

Emerging out of these studies are twin key themes: accommodation and adaptation. At the beginning of this chapter I referred to rapid social change; this change is not uniform or in one direction only. The communities studied experience tension created by the relationships they have with the wider world and its values. Macrocosmically, this world is driven by mass communication and popular culture, capitalist wealth creation and the tensions between multinational interests of global corporations and nation states. Microcosmically these communities base themselves upon, and identify



themselves through, the experience of trust: trust in the relationships they form, the tradition they adhere to, the truth that they hold. Trust comes in various forms. It is much more difficult to extend trust into a macrocosmic world of popular and corporate communication, with a belief in its own rationality and sense of progress from which religious values or 'spiritual' concern is often absent. In the microcosmic world trust relates back to the two terms used earlier: dignity and caring. Within our studies we can identify these three terms expressed in various ways in beliefs held and practices performed and in attention being paid to moments of spiritual significance that each community holds dear involving worship, contemplation, celebration, mourning, suffering, loss, hope and aspiration. How can the intimacy of such community life be preserved in the face of the globalization of 'culture'? The two would seem to be hopelessly at odds with each other. One answer is a retreat from the modern world; another is an accommodation to it while striking an agreement that respects minority and spiritual difference; another is to missionize in order to effect changes in the wider society. These communities have all responded to the issues of accommodation and adaptation in different ways, and continue to respond. In this, we find some indication of the complex negotiations at work to preserve difference and to influence change. While dignity, caring and trust appear to be universal qualities to which we would all aspire, they are embedded in the particulars of different narratives and are expressed in different spiritual and cultural practices that operate as the context for the preservation of these qualities. Therefore, attitudes of trust and mistrust can largely turn upon not just a liberal accommodation of difference, but an affirmation of values across difference. In this, new divisions are created with regard to such issues as prescription and prohibition; for example, in relation to sexual activity, alcohol and the rights of particular groups such as gays and lesbians. As Bauman observes:

Consider two sharply contradictory opinions: Logstrup's first, and then Shestov's: It is a characteristic of human life that we mutually trust each other. ... Initially we believe one another's word, initially we trust one another. ... To trust, however, is to deliver oneself over into the hands of another. ... That trust and self-surrender that goes with it are a fundamental part of human life is seen when trust is violated.



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Homo homini lupus is one of the most steadfast maxims. . . . In each of our neighbours we fear a wolf. This fellow is evil minded, if he is not restrained by law he will ruin us, so we think each time a man gets out of the rut of sanctified tradition.¹²

The two differing attitudes expressed above alert us to the fragile foundation on which we stand in dealing with spiritual difference across communities in the context of social change. The degree to which trust or mistrust is extended, and to which accommodation and adaptation can occur, are highly sensitive issues that exist as challenges to mainstream Western society thrown out by the existence of those communities in its midst that question its values. It is not just a challenge the other way round. Perhaps this is one of the most significant effects of globalization, that it requires a recognition of 'the other', in the form of these different communities on their own terms, towards a negotiated future. Within such recognition must be an accommodation of spiritual and moral difference. This will not be easy to achieve. In the case of the Amish, it appears to have resolved itself in the marking out of a territory of religious and economic self-sufficiency. With other communities, it will be different.

Two further questions are raised by these studies. The first is: To what extent can spirituality in the modern world be nourished by the presence of these communities? The answer may be equivocal. In certain cases ideological difference would suggest the question is not worth asking; in others it would seem pertinent. In each case, the issues confronted are different. It is easier to recognize the value of Buddhist meditation as a means of self-improvement or a contribution to the quality of life without becoming a monastic. It is less easy to convert to ISKCON and embrace Krishna Consciousness without a radical disruption of worldview. Nevertheless, an ecumenical sense of spiritual purpose and global values is possible across difference, as is witnessed in the Taizé Community. The answer would appear to be to go forward with care and sensitivity with regard to spiritual sensibilities, but to go forward all the same.

The second question is: To what extent can we speak of a non-religious spirituality? In my own reflections on reading these studies there is one particular issue that strikes me as a salient point of conclusion to this introduction. As a preface to it, I quote Eagleton:



As hybridity spreads, so do the cries of heresy. For every waft of Parisian perfume in Tokyo, one can find a young Nazi thug ... What has happened in our day is not just that this sense of culture [as cosmopolitan and aesthetic] is locked in ferocious dispute with culture as identity. There was always a quarrel between liberal and communalist versions of culture. Culture as aesthetic and culture as anthropological now constitute not just an academic quarrel but a geopolitical axis. They represent, in effect, the difference between the West and its others.¹³

The issue that emerges is that when we speak of different cultures we also speak of different identities and, within that, of different religious, spiritual, economic and communal points of reference. Thus hybridity creates heresy and the creation of a liberal global aesthetics cannot immunize itself from racial violence. If globalization has a deeper meaning than the espousal of liberal agreement or the benefits of increased technological communication, and the possibilities of greater wealth creation, it has to take account of 'the West and its others' being in communication in the same locality. Not to do so is to invite conflict and division as a result of neglect – it represents a wilful fiddling without regard to possible conflagration. A Western notion of culture and prosperity that is heedless of the presence of alternative voices in its midst, that call on different sources of authority and spirituality, or tend to the notion of community in a more localized way, is in danger of blinding itself with its own hubris in a contemporary reconstruction of Oedipal tragedy.

Notes

1. T. Todorov (1999), *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (London: Phoenix University Press), p. 16.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 17. Todorov's study is a fascinating exploration of 'ordinary virtues' and the nature of the moral life, within which the notion of the spiritual is woven.
3. T. Eagleton (2000), *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell).
4. As used by Bauman to indicate the fluidity of cultural exchange and montage. See Z. Bauman (1999), *Culture as Praxis* (London: Sage), pp. xl–xlvi.
5. Communities that have suffered misrepresentation in the past, often in articles that have appeared in the popular press or in television journalism, are wary of representation by outsiders. For this reason,



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certain groups that might have appeared in this volume could not be considered.

6. Edward Said's studies provide a good example. Liam Gearon draws on these in his contribution on Taizé.
7. Reputedly, Prabhupāda, when confronted with this charge in an interview, responded with 'perhaps their brains need to be washed', related in a conversation with Indrayesha, Bhaktivedanta Manor, 1999.
8. See Stevick, p. 159.
9. See Daniels, p. 177.
10. See Gearon, p. 194.
11. See Jane Erricker, p. 226.
12. Z. Bauman (1993), *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell), p. 115, quoting K. E. Logstrup (1971), *The Ethical Demand*, trans. Theodor I. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), pp. 8–9, and B. Martin (1970) (ed.), *A Shevtov Anthology* (Athens: Ohio University Press), p. 70.
13. Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, pp. 63–4.



9. In the realm of the deathless

The Thai Buddhist Forest Retreat Order

Clive Erricker

About this mind . . . in truth there is nothing really wrong with it. It is intrinsically pure. Within itself it is already peaceful. Our practice is to see the Original Mind. So we must train the mind to know the sense impressions, and not get lost in them. To make it peaceful. Just this is the aim of all this difficult practice we put ourselves through.¹⁴

A homecoming

Driving north on the London Orbital motorway (the M25), I am caught up in reflections on how the community at *Amaravati* may have changed. Mid-December has produced gales and horizontal rain. I turn off towards Hemel Hempstead, and then, five miles on, the lane that leads past the pub up towards *Amaravati* (The Deathless Realm), unannounced on any signpost. It is five years since I last came here, despite long acquaintance and association with the Order since their arrival in England. The huts, as far as I can see in the darkness of a British winter, are as they were. The new temple, built back from the entrance and adjoining the old *sala*, is not conspicuous upon arrival. At 7.45 p.m. there is no one about; the evening *puja* is already underway. I look around and familiarize myself: it's the same car-park and familiar territory. Entering the new temple I take a meditation cushion at the back and join the silent meditation. I notice the men and women, monks (*bhikkhus*) and nuns (*siladharas*), are traditionally divided to left and right of the centre. On the left, where I sit, are twelve *bhikkhus*, two eight-



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precept monastics (*anagorikas*) and five laymen. To the right are five *siladharas*, one *anagarika* and six laywomen, Caucasian and southern Asian. On first encounter there is no noticeable increase in the size of the community. Ajahn Sumedho sits in front of the shrine, in the centre-front, facing the gold Buddha-rupa astride the brick plinth with a facing fresco of the Buddha preaching and being revered by those listening, conveyed in the *anjali mudras* towards him. The space of the new *sala*, vertical as well as horizontal, is a reflection of the teachings of the order: uncluttered, supported by bare wooden beams, and with the only adornment being traditional Thai accoutrements to either side of the shrine. The feeling of space draws attention to the smallest movement: the rising smoke from the candles on the shrine. In the timelessness of this interior, I am drawn to that which echoes the teaching by its distinctive presence: the constancy of change and its irreducibility to permanence, even in the deep stillness of this silence.

Context and background

The larger map within which this study is placed is the movement of Buddhism from East to West, largely accomplished within the last hundred years, though encounter can be traced back to Greek civilization with the meeting of Venerable Nagasena with King Menanda in the Himalayas 150 years before Jesus' intervention in human history, and even earlier.¹⁵ However, the history of the West was influenced little by Buddhism until the 1960s. Previously, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some Europeans had gone East to discover that which their disenchantment with the West led them to quest. This was not without influence on Buddhism in Asia itself as it modernized, or protestantized, with the general colonial expansion of British and European influence at that time.¹⁶ This led to a number of changes. One of these was the attempt to reinvigorate the Buddhist tradition to make it plausible as a dynamic spiritual and political force and philosophy in the twentieth century. In the course of this, movements occurred which returned to, rediscovered or reinterpreted the original teachings and practices, as found in the texts ascribed to the Buddha. One such movement of contemporary significance is the subject of this chapter: the Thai Forest Retreat Order, which has now made an appreciable impact on



the Western world regarding the acceptance of and interest in Buddhist practice, as distinct from just the attraction of Buddhist ideas. The curiousness of this effect is that the Order's growth in Thailand was in response to the decline of meditative practice and the discipline of monastic observance. But its growth in the West is due to a contrary impulse, an interest in meditation and disaffection with Western values and lifestyles.

The growth of the Buddhist presence in the United Kingdom in the latter half of the twentieth century has been cumulative and diverse, such that it is possible to find, or indeed commit oneself to, a representative range of any form of Buddhism found across the globe: Tibetan, Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren, Theravadin, for example. Beyond this there are also the seeds of seeking to establish a form of British Buddhism, as traditional forms adapt to a new cultural setting or, as in the case of the Western Buddhist Order, create a distinct form that is free of alien cultural characteristics from its inception. There are also Buddhist groups that cross traditional divides and welcome the pluralism of the situation as a positive enriching development.

This situation has developed into a fascinating picture of religious, social and cultural change, which is still in its infancy. Within this the question of contemporary spiritual values is a key factor. The Forest Retreat Order represents one of the most traditional forms of Buddhist transplantation and, for that reason, paradoxically perhaps, in its new setting, one of the most radical alternatives to conventional Western lifestyles and values. How does a Thai *Sangha* based on the strict observance of the *Vinaya*¹⁷ and accustomed to remote rural territory flourish in the West?

Beginnings

Documentation of the growth of Ajahn Chah's Thai Forest Retreat Order in the West is now readily available.¹⁸ Its beginnings resided in his own disaffection with the state of Buddhism in Thailand after receiving monastic ordination at the age of 21 in 1939. The study of Buddhist doctrine and *Pali* texts within his training brought him no closer to realizing the Buddha's emphasis on the teachings having one aim: the cessation of suffering. The laxness of the practice by *bhikkhus* and laypeople alike was equally uninspiring. Such



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disenchantment, which actually threads throughout the movement as an inspiration and is echoed later, led to Ajahn Chah's meeting with the meditation master Ajahn Mun, his subsequent *dhutanga*¹⁹ of seven years in the forests and jungles of Thailand, and his conviction as to the importance of the monastic rule and the practice of mindfulness as 'seeing that everything arises in one's own heart'.²⁰ The forcefulness of this insight and its abiding presence in the movement is testified to in a piece of recent monkish graffiti on the workshop door of *Amaravati*, lying behind the new temple. It reads: 'mindfulness leads to the deathless, heedlessness leads to death', expressed with the same stark force and directness as Ajahn Chah used in his darsanas. This is a paraphrase of verse 21 of the *Dhammapada* which reads as follows:

Mindfulness is the path to the deathless;
Heedlessness is the path to death.
The mindful do not die;
But the heedless are as if dead already.

This can also be found as a prolegomena to Ajahn Sumedho's teachings in *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless*²¹ and thus alerts us to the significance of the maintenance of tradition in the teachings and practices in the present Order, which gives it its direction and sustenance in its present situation, despite or perhaps because of increasing social and cultural diversity.

The intervening years introduce us to the pattern of historical events which brought the Forest Retreat Order to the West. It is a pattern woven from Western disaffection finding purpose in Eastern wisdom rediscovered, and a resurgent monastic discipline transplanting itself in a Western environment through seeding itself in its Western converts. The dynamic of this development may be traced in a remark written by Ajahn Sucitto in his prologue to *Cittaviveka: How the Buddha Came to Sussex* about Ajahn Sumedho: 'World-weariness and an interest in Eastern religion have a way of breeding good bhikkhus.'²²

This motivation can also be identified in other Westerners who ordained and have become senior monks in the Order. Reading the biographical notes on the contributors to *Seeing the Way: An Anthology of Teachings by English Speaking Disciples of Ajahn Chah*, one is struck by the similarity of middle-class background, university education and the desire, often through travelling, to find



an alternative, more spiritual, lifestyle. Ajahn Sumedho, previously Robert Jackman, had found his way to Thailand via Berkeley University, the Peace Corps in Borneo, and service as a medical officer in the Korean War. He was introduced to Ajahn Chah at *Wat Pah Bong* in 1967 after his first year as a novice monk. He spent the next ten years under his guidance and, between 1974 and 1977, was Abbott of a new monastery *Wat Pah Nanachet*, for the training of increasing numbers of Western monks in north east Thailand.

Ajahn Chah's prescription for their training was simple and austere, as Batchelor records:

I know that you have had a background of material comfort and outward freedom. . . . By comparison you now live an austere existence. Food and climate are different from your home. . . . This is the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. This is how you learn . . . I know some of you are well educated and very knowledgeable. People with little education and worldly knowledge can practise easily. But it is as if you Westerners have a very large house to clean. When you have cleaned the house, you will have a very big living space. But you must be patient.²³

In 1977 an invitation from the English Sangha Trust to establish an order of Western Buddhist monks in Britain prompted the movement of Ajahn Sumedho and three other Western *bhikkhus* to Haverstock Hill, Hampstead, under the initial tutelage of Ajahn Chah. Following a chance encounter on Hampstead Heath with a jogger, who was also the owner of Hammer Wood in West Sussex, while conducting the alms round, the move to Chithurst monastery was accomplished. Chithurst House, a dilapidated mansion, was purchased as a residence for the *Sangha*, adjoining the wood for which they were now responsible as tenants. The next two years were ones of restoration as far as premises were concerned, and ingratiation in relation to local residents – whose understandings of Buddhist monastic practice were non-existent. In an invaluable piece of social documentary, the BBC filmed *When the Buddha Comes to Sussex*,²⁴ a chronicle of these beginnings. Apart from showing the original restorative work of the monks, and acting as an introduction to traditional Buddhist practice, it signals the initial impact of an alien spiritual presence within the historical rural preserve of genteel middle-class English conservatism. In a parody of difference each plays its part with commitment and concern; a case study in Deriddean radical alterity.²⁵



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The sorts of anxieties expressed and misunderstandings that ensued exemplify many of the difficulties involved in the transmutation of traditional monocultural localities into acceptance of the pluralism of the larger world. In this case the peculiarity of encounter resided in the coming together of two traditional ways of life that were new to each other by virtue of the geographical and cultural distance that had always separated them. In other words, it was the shock of encountering another form of tradition that created the shock of the new, at least insofar as rural Sussex was concerned. It was the importance of the *Vinaya* to the Forest Order that created the sense of disorientation and concern, as it manifested itself in the distinctive presence and activity of the saffron-robed community. Comments made by local residents at a meeting organized by the local vicar and elsewhere 'on location' illustrate the difficulties involved in the acceptance of 'otherness' and the ways in which it is understood. The following comments are illustrative of this:

'This little hamlet ... has been steeped in the Christian religion for hundreds of years ... even the ground ... is steeped in Christianity ... this is an intrusion, an invasion ... they are all searching for something. We've got what we want. We've got a God, always had a God.'

'I think it's all right provided they keep to themselves. I don't know what they are doing now, searching for food or something ... I disapprove of that frightfully.'

'I think this is the most remarkable event that this hall has ever seen and I'm quite prepared to wake up tomorrow and find it was all a dream. What we want to know is how large is the community and how many hangers-on are there.'

'Walking through Leicester Square the other day I came across what appeared to be a Buddhist rave-up ... those sort of people, who may be a fringe element of your faith, may come down here and this sort of thing may go on at Chithurst.'

'The only reason people are asking you questions is because you're different ... dressed in your funny gear. Good luck to you if you can make a go of it and get something for nothing. I mean it.'

This raises the issue of why there was no previous adaptation decided upon by the Order before locating themselves in such an environment. Ajahn Sumedho's comments on this are instructive both at a practical and at a spiritual level:



We are a tradition that believes itself to be from the original ... and we are limiting our lives to the boundaries of the *Vinaya* ... to get us to reflect on our impulsivity, assumptions, cultural habits ... alms mendicancy is an act of faith. We seek to live within the limitations it confers and reflect daily ... and be grateful for what we are given: food, clothing, shelter, medicine being made available to you. Our lives have to depend on the good-heartedness of the lay community. If the lay community isn't good-hearted, then we wouldn't be able to exist ... this allows us to maintain meditation: the spiritual exercises that we have.

The translation of this way of life to Western society was one of the doubts many of us had. In Thailand the community is 98% with us. You take it for granted that people will provide what's necessary. Coming to a non-religious modern country like this one we couldn't be sure this would happen.

When I asked Ajahn Chah about this he said:

'Well, are there any good-hearted people in that country?'

Not being British I couldn't be sure! But I said, 'I think there are.'

He said, 'Well, as long as there are you can go.'

What he was pointing to was a general goodness that was awakened to, given opportunities to express itself – and that you can see here.²⁶

In other words, the issue of cultural acceptance was subservient to the question of spiritual qualities. Or, to put it differently, any difficulties encountered at a social and cultural level could be overcome by a recognition of the good-heartedness that lay in the lifestyles and purposes of the two different communities, given time and despite such differences. This attitude informed the *Sangha's* response to the tensions their visible presence raised. An illustration of this is given in the record of Ajahn Sucitto, especially in relation to the alms round (*pindapada*) that Ajahn Chah had determined was a necessary aspect of the practice to continue:

This spectacle must have been more alarming than we thought, and at first there was a lot of mistrust and reserve in the minds of the local people, who tended to bracket any Eastern religion in the category of cults of idol worshipers following strange or – even worse – no gods. The discipline, with its emphasis on harmlessness and modesty, again helped us out where no amount of teaching of Buddhist Philosophy would have done.²⁷



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Teachings and practice

‘Don’t read books! Read your own heart instead.’²⁸ This instruction by Ajahn Chah lies, insistently, at the centre of the practice. Its essence lies in mindfulness. Its claim is radical, and yet susceptible to confused and more conventional interpretations. The problem can lie in thinking that the comprehension of the truth in the teachings can be accomplished in a conceptual or intellectual fashion. This is the antithesis of the practice or, rather, it is the hindrance that the practice seeks to eradicate. Thus the teaching takes on a function and quality normally associated with Zen and the notion of ‘direct pointing at reality’. Ajahn Sumedho makes the same reference in stating:

The problem is that people confuse the finger pointing at the moon ... instead of looking at the moon they look at the finger. ... If you look at any religion it’s got the truth in it, but you have to look where it’s pointing, like the finger pointing at the moon – it’s not about what finger is best.²⁹

But this notion, in practice, is difficult to grasp – because the desire to grasp it is the difficulty. The tendency is to set out to change things – the world, oneself – rather than letting go of such tendencies and abiding with what is – the way things are. It is akin to viewing from a distance and getting up close. The distanced view can map and order what is being seen or studied. Up close, things are no longer within that perspective. The conventional answer lies in keeping the former perspective or overview in one’s mind, then placing the close detail within it. This makes for understanding, or how we make sense of the world conceptually. But the practice – which is what one encounters close up – demands a letting go of that former perception, the perspective which keeps the conceptual constructs in place. Thus the conceptual constructs of Buddhism, Buddhist teachings, world, self, morality, etc. are radically challenged as being of no spiritual worth, in themselves. This can result in a Kafkaesque confusion: it is impossible to reach the castle seen and situated clearly from a distance. There is no such castle to reach.

This denial of our conventional understanding of progress creates the point where many lose patience with a spiritual message that can be admired from the ‘distanced’, that is conceptual and rational,



view of conceptual construction, and yet appears only to want to confound at the point of engagement. But it is at this point that commitment is called for. The result can be exasperation. Ajahn Sumedho comments on this idea of 'having a view' as follows.

I have been living in England now for twenty-three years and observed the frustration created because of people coming with fixed ideas, and they hold on to those fixed ideas, so to get them to see that requires quite a shift ... Ajahn Chah, he would say, 'Kill your defilements.' This particular statement gets interpreted as kill the evil forces. This is our cultural interpretation. For example, in Christianity you've got to get rid of the evil and hold on to the good. There is a logic there that makes sense in our cultural conditioning. But in terms of experience, direct experience, when you try to kill evil you are actually empowering it. In capital punishment and with heretics, as just two examples, we can see this sense of annihilating is such a big deal, and so we are psychologically primed to that kind of interpretation. It turns out in meditation that killing your defilements doesn't work; it's necessary to welcome them in order to understand them, even when you don't like it you have to accept it for what it is in order to see it properly. It's a way of learning from both bad and good. Even holding on to the good is attachment that blinds you to the way life is, so you are always being upset and frightened when there isn't good there. Yes, when I look at some people's faces when I talk I can see this is a problem.

Yet in Christianity the same teaching is there, in all religions, actually.³⁰ The thinking part is a polarization of everything. You can only have one thought in one moment, so you think good or bad. But good and bad at the same moment is impossible in terms of thought. So, when you depend on thought you are polarized into this dualism. If you take a holistic view, so all forces of nature belong together; you are not caught up in resisting, believing or depending on these conditions that will change. Thus if I have an evil thought I give it power by reacting to it. If I just know it is an evil thought and accept it, it becomes powerless, just drops. Evil will always be empowered by resistance: hating it, anger, indignation, wanting to cure, wanting to punish. Like taking revenge in Rwanda by more killing. There is righteous anger but attachment to that gives the very process more power. And you're not exposing the delusion that goes along with it.³¹

The antidote, or cure, to this state of contamination is mindfulness: continual awareness in the present moment. However, this in turn can turn into a 'Buddhist goal' as soon as it is conceived of. Ajahn Sumedho's reflections on this in 'Only one breath' are a teaching



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given from his own experience: 'The danger in meditation practice is the habit of grasping at things, grasping at states; so the concept that's most useful is the concept of letting go, rather than of attaining and achieving.'³² In conclusion he remarks:

It's pretty heavy, sometimes, to burn up attachments in our mind. The Holy Life is a holocaust, a total burning, a burning up of self, of ignorance ... and so in our life here there has to be this willingness to burn away the self-views, the opinions, the desires, the restlessness, the greed; all of it, the whole of it, so that there's nothing but purity remaining. Then when there is purity, there is nobody, nothing, there's that, the 'suchness'. And let go of that. ... Because of the holocaust, there is no ignorance remaining; there is purity, clarity, intelligence.³³

This demands a 'trusting to mindfulness' as a means to overcoming this refuge in 'having a view'. The liberation of having no view can easily be construed as both an annihilation of self and values, and, in the context of the practice, a frustrated enterprise as one fails to become transformed into the prospective ideal. These are simply matters for reflection. Despair is as much a matter for spiritual reflection as any other, as Ajahn Sucitto, in a talk on 'Making peace with despair', makes clear:

This question of making peace with despair is a profoundly spiritual question. It's one that cannot be resolved by trying to make the world into a different place – which tends to be the normal approach. To make peace with despair is a matter of understanding not just where difficulties such as sickness and violence arise, but also how the feeling of being bound to and oppressed by those problems occur ... where is that feeling and just what is it? It's wanting things to be other than they are or why they should or shouldn't be, or what we're going to do about them. But seeing where this despondency actually hits us – where is that feeling and just what it is ... you just watch and keep your attention on the heart which can allow that to be ... it will ebb away. This is a skilful way in which one defuses the anxiety of the world.³⁴

This reversal of our usual tendency to say what should I give and how can I improve myself by giving it is granted a further twist by Ajahn Anando in a text on 'Kindness and insight' beginning with the cultivation of *metta*.³⁵ In speaking of his own 'post-trauma syndrome', brought about by serving in the marines in the Vietnam War and serious injury, he offers *metta bhavana* as 'wonderful when dealing with such conditions'.³⁶ *Metta bhavana* is a meditation for



developing loving kindness. But it is also a preparation for investigating the mind (*vipasana*) by then asking:

Who? Who is it that is practising metta bhavana? Who is it that is listening now? Who is it that is in pain, who is wondering, who is confused, who is doubting, who is happy, who isn't happy? Who is this? ... Intentionally bring up the question Who? And notice clearly what state of mind follows. The mind stops!³⁷

Mindfulness is required not simply to encourage virtue in the form of generosity and kindness, but to let go of the mental conditions that make us dependent in our responses. Ajahn Chah explains this as 'the practice to be free of suffering in the cycle of birth and death', which requires regarding:

all the various activities of mind, all those you like and all those you dislike, in the same way as you would regard a cobra. The cobra is an extremely poisonous snake, poisonous to cause death if it should bite us. And so, also, it is with our moods; the moods that we like are poisonous, the moods that we dislike are also poisonous. They prevent our minds from being free.³⁸

It is possible to understand or at least be attracted to the teachings without taking up the discipline of the practice. This was a tendency in the first popular enthusiasm for Buddhism, and particularly Zen, as it permeated Western and especially youth culture in the late 1950s and 1960s. We find this romantic attraction in the writings of Kerouac, Watts, Ginsberg and others. Latterly there are other movements that have, so to speak, renounced the renunciant life (the discipline of the *Vinaya*) as unnecessary or inappropriate to their practice of mindfulness in modern society, while still respecting the integrity of those who abide by it.³⁹

Prospects, influence and adaptation

The transition from a Thai to a Western context has required and continues to reveal transformation at a subtler level than dress, routine and traditional observance. The reciprocity existing between the monastic *sangha* and the lay population in Thailand is culturally engrained, and its worth is justified by the principle of merit and the traditional importance of the virtue of generosity. The merit (*punna*) generated from giving to the monastic order can bring propitious



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karmic results in this life and the next.⁴⁰ The tendency in the Western context is to disregard such ideas, which depend upon identifying such discrete and separate roles and practices for the monastic *sangha* and the lay follower. These are underpinned by theoretical expectations of different kinds in relation to reciprocity and practice. For example, the spiritual attainment of monks is through the renunciant discipline, but lay supporters make their own karmic progress through merit. In the Western context even such a central principle as karma, operating as a supramundane explanation of events, is not necessarily accepted as a tenet of faith. The disenchantment with metaphysical explanations operating as doctrinal maps is one of the principle disaffections of sceptical Western minds.

Bell's discussion of this issue of the terms, conditions and tangled history of reciprocity alerts us to the complexities of the relationship between monastic *sangha* and lay community. It is not surprising, therefore, that it takes another twist in this situation. What we may term the de-supernaturalization accompanying the Forest *sangha*'s approach to Buddhist practice, and yet its insistence on the merits of spiritual practice is attractive to those who are disenchanted with both religious doctrinalism and authoritarianism and worldly or materialistic values. It offers a distinctively different and distinctively present alternative way of life.

It was the traditional Thai situation that actually confronted Ajahn Chah in seeking to purify Buddhist practice. Bell perspicaciously points out the change in Thai practice as Ajahn Chah and other Reform teachers sought to 'purify' lay understanding of the relationship between *punna* (merit) and *dana* (generosity). Drawing on the research of Piker in Thailand she quotes: 'many villagers question whether worldly involvement is really worth it, though their own needs and desires are too strong to permit them actually to quit the arena of everyday life as the layman knows it.'⁴¹

Given this psychological shift from wanting to question worldly involvement, what then provides the link between monastic and layperson is the example set by the former being venerated by the latter: 'It is largely because the life styles of monks give palpable evidence of struggling to still these same emotions – and in large measure succeeding, at least compared to the laymen – that they are so highly venerated.'⁴² Thus we may say that scepticism in relation to worldly ambition provides the psychological motivating force behind



both lay appreciation of the practice of the monks and behind the attraction to the monastic life of those Westerners who became disciples of Ajahn Chah.

The alternative psychological motivation for reciprocity, that of *punna* providing a spiritual currency which is cashed in by receiving a higher rebirth, a supernaturalist interpretation, is equally discouraged by the teaching of the Forest Retreat Order. Thus we receive a second dose of scepticism. This is not to say that this karmic elevation will not be the result, but that it represents a corrupted understanding of *dana*, due to the selfish motivation lying behind it. This has two effects. The first is the need for reciprocity to be based on 'spiritual' principles of psychological motivation: altruistic giving or gratefulness. The second is the playing down of doctrinalism, the notion that adherence to a given doctrinal truth in itself results in some salvific outcome. This provides us with the clue to how reciprocity can still be maintained, despite removing two traditional reasons why it has been seen to persist in relation to *punna*. Reciprocity can now only persist because of the monastics' adherence to the *Vinaya*. But far from being a stumbling-block in the translation of Buddhist practice to the West, it becomes a vitalizing force within that translation due to the scepticism of Western values and lifestyle that underpins both monastic practice and lay admiration of the same. The positive link, if you like the new spiritual currency, is the understanding that monastic and lay practice are founded on the same motivation: spiritual development. *Bhavana* is the aspiration of both groups in this 'dyadic relationship', as Bell puts it.⁴³

Thus meditative practice is the linking factor. Reciprocity ceases to be principally about two contrasting groups bound in relationship because one is involved in spiritual activity – 'the Holy life' – and the other provides the material means for them to pursue it. Rather the first group provides the example, motivation and spiritual support for the latter to do likewise, within the lay context, but to a differing degree. More a case of a spiritual rubbing off or putting something of the Holy life into the lay secular context. Within this relationship *dana* works both ways in a spiritual sense. The layperson supports those following the monastic life by acts of spiritual giving, generated out of gratefulness or kind-heartedness inspired by the example of the monastic *sangha*. This is figuratively expressed in the requisites provided. The teachings and practice of the Order then



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complete the spiritual transaction because they complete the cycle of spiritual regeneration as a motivation to the layperson to live similarly as far as the lay context allows. This cyclical reciprocity is different in character and dynamic to one in which the roles are sharply divided. It is in fact a different sort of reciprocity, one with mutually shared aspirations rather than contrasting routes to self-improvement, even though the monastic form still operates as a clear division.

This in turn operates at a micro and macro level. Despite differences in lifestyle, ordained and layperson occupy the same spiritual space. The practice of the *dhamma* involving mindfulness, *dana* and the underlying principle of the samsaric world being the fettering creation of the heedless mind psychologically dissolves the usual category distinctions we apply when thinking dualistically. Thus the layperson's practice within his or her lifestyle is an extension of rather than in contrast to the monastic life. This tends to break down the usual ideological distinctions that underpin religious and secular classifications. The non-ideological character of the teaching actually provides, to use the Buddhist term, a refuge from the anxieties of modern life by seeing them from a new perspective which is shared by monastic and layperson alike. As a conjecture one might say that this spiritual bond, rather than the usual issues considered in the question of reciprocity, is the thread, or *sutra*, that creates a valuing of the monastic presence. In other words, at a 'spiritual' level, far from being an anachronistic presence in the modern world, the monastic *sangha* is a regenerative presence in a postmodern world in which disillusion with the trappings of modernity can be replaced with a new understanding of social and spiritual purpose. The practical reference point, and inspiration, for this derives from the *sangha* lifestyle acting as an antidote to modern capitalist societal preoccupations.

The analysis I have presented above, of what we might call the spiritual economy of the movement, has to be placed alongside the material economy that ensures the existence of the monastic *sangha*. The embedding of religious movements in a new cultural and social setting can result in a de-spiritualization as they become more institutionalized and gain a firmer economic foundation. At present, the Forest Retreat Order still gains the majority of its funds from Thailand. This allows for such ventures as the building of the new *sala* at *Amaravati* and further growth in the Western world. If this



growth continues, or is at least consolidated, might it be at the cost of domestication?⁴⁴ In other words, as financial support increases within Western localities, will the characteristics of the movement tend to reflect a more modernist tendency whereby lay supporters can identify with it but in more of a social rather than spiritual way? The 'merit' gained would then be something more akin to a reputation for philanthropy or a 'rubbing off' of moral uprightness by mere association. In this respect one colleague has suggested that the Forest Retreat Order has the potential to transmute into a replacement for the Church of England for laypeople. Warding against this requires paying close attention to the continual rekindling of the original spiritual fire and premises of its non-materialist motivation.

As Ajahn Sumedho puts it, 'That's what it's about, you know: the *dhamma* is taught, the *Vinaya* is practised, and the four requisites are adequate.'⁴⁵ If this renunciant attitude can be transferred not only at a material level but also in relation to ideas and shifting and conflicting notions of personal identity, even the burden of knowing who you are and what you want is removed, or at least ameliorated, along with personal ambition. With this in mind we end with the following remonstrance from Ajahn Chah:

There isn't anything and we don't call it anything – that's all there is to it! Be finished with all of it. Even the knowing that doesn't belong to anybody, so be finished with that, too! Consciousness is not an individual, not a being, not a self, not an other, so finish with that – finish with everything! There is nothing worth wanting! It's all just a load of trouble. . . . You can call it 'Original Mind' if you insist. You can call it whatever you like.⁴⁶

Notes

1. Ajahn Chah (1982), *Bodhinaya* (Thailand: Bung Wai Forest Monastery), p. 8; also quoted in S. Batchelor (1994), *The Awakening of the West: The Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* (London: Aquarian), p. 48.
2. Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, p. xviff.
3. Reference to this can be found in a number of works, principally the following: R. Gombridge (1988), *Theravada Buddhism* (London: RKP); Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*; S. Bell (1998), 'British Theravada Buddhism: otherworldly theories, and the theory of



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exchange', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (13.2), pp. 149–70. 'Protestant Buddhism' refers to the effect of modernization in Asian countries by European influence. The result has been to create reform based on re-expression of what are understood to be original teachings and practices of the Buddha and early *sangha*. This tends to be mixed with rationalizing the teachings to exclude what are understood as cultural corruptions. Insofar as European influence has been a significant force on this as, by implication, has the notion of modernization, the terms have some value. However, the complexity of this process of reform becomes more complex as it shifts back into Western culture approximately a hundred years on, as I seek to show later in this chapter. It should also not be forgotten that Buddhism involved itself in a similar movement to reform in the creation of Chan and then Zen Buddhism in China and Japan respectively, before the terms 'modernization' and 'protestantization' were in currency. It is not surprising, therefore, that we find close links in the teachings of the Forest Retreat Order and Zen Buddhism. We might say that the terms currently used to explain reform have some validity (especially in a historical and transcultural sense) but should be regarded as provisional and limited in relation to the ongoing changes still occurring.

4. The strict code of monastic discipline and the scriptural collection of rules and commentaries.
5. See the sources cited above. In addition, the issue of the growth, impact and transformation of Buddhism in the West has spawned much research in academic journals on the study of religion as well as in larger research publications and more popular literature. Interestingly it occasionally becomes the subject of television documentaries, as I indicate below.
6. *Dhutanga* literally means to wander or go forth (*tudong* in Thai). It is an undertaking of the mendicant practice of leaving a monastery and being dependent for physical survival on the giving of those who support you on your travels. It is an illustration of the austerity of alms mendicacy.
7. Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, p. 39.
8. Ajahn Sumedho (1987), *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless* (Great Gaddesden: Amaravati Publications).
9. Ajahn Sumedho (1992), *Cittaviveka: Teachings from the Silent Mind* (Great Gaddesden: Amaravati Publications), p. 13.
10. Quoted in Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, pp. 46–7.
11. *When the Buddha Comes to Sussex* (transmission date 7 October 1979) (London: BBC Publications).



12. This phrase refers to not just a difference of view, i.e. opposition or conflict, but to the disparity between the foundations or understandings of how debate and compromise are reached, in other words, a rationally unbridgeable chasm. Sucitto's following remarks illustrate a different approach to the disparity of view based on affectivity and the importance of virtuous qualities, rather than the idea of rational exchange of opinion.
13. Interview with Ajahn Sumedho, 15 December 1999.
14. Ajahn Sumedho, *Cittaviveka*, p. 20.
15. Ajahn Chah, *Bodhinaya*, p. 59. Heart and mind are not conceived as separate, as in Western philosophy, concerning rationality and emotions. Here the elision of the two terms is meant to convey that these two elements of human response to the world of sensory experience are of one piece. Thus 'heart' and 'mind', in Western parlance, are used interchangeably, if inadequately.
16. Interview with Ajahn Sumedho, 15 December 1999.
17. For example, in this statement by St John of the Cross:

That thou mayest have pleasure in everything,
seek pleasure in nothing.
That thou mayest know everything,
Seek to know nothing.
That thou mayest possess all things,
Seek to possess nothing.
That thou mayest be everything,
Seek to be nothing.

St John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*; also cited in Dass Ram (1978), *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook* (New York: Bantam), p. 150.

18. Interview with Ajahn Sumedho, 15 December 1999.
19. Ajahn Sumedho (1991), *The Way It Is* (Great Gaddesden: Amaravati Publications), p. 78.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
21. Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Santacitto and Ajahn Sucitto (1990), *Peace and Kindness* (Great Gaddesden: Amaravati Publications), pp. 11–22.
22. Ajahn Anando (1989), 'Kindness and insight', in *Seeing the Way* (Great Gaddesden, Amaravati Publications), pp. 78–90.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
25. Ajahn Chah, *Bodhinaya*, p. 73.
26. See Batchelor's survey of 'Satipathanna: mindful awareness', in which he documents movements and groups set up to encourage *vipasana* practice, in Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, pp. 341–52.



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27. For a discussion of this see S. Bell (1998), 'British Theravada Buddhism: otherworldly theories, and the theory of exchange', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (13.2), pp. 149–70.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 149; S. Piker (1973), 'Buddhism and modernisation in contemporary Thailand', *Contributions to Asian Studies* (IV), p. 58.
29. Bell, 'British Theravada Buddhism', p. 159; Piker, 'Buddhism and modernisation', p. 55.
30. Bell, 'British Theravada Buddhism', p. 169.
31. Carrithers defines this as 'the process by which the world of the renouncer moves towards a closer involvement to the world of the lay people (M. Carrithers (1984), 'The domestication of the Sangha (correspondence)', *Man* (NS) (19), pp. 321–2; also quoted in Bell, 'British Theravada Buddhism', p. 150.) I am using the term slightly differently to indicate how the layperson can use the movement to satisfy what he or she wants from it rather than what it has the potential to offer. This, in turn, will exercise an effect on the movement as it responds to this centripetal force, i.e. a tendency for the desires of the layperson to refashion the purposes of the movement. The opposite, centrifugal force, can be said to be the influence of the movement on the desires of the layperson. I am suggesting here that this is a critical equation in relation to this study.
32. Interview with Ajahn Sumedho, 15 December 1999.
33. *Seeing the Way: Buddhist Reflections on the Spiritual Life* (1989), an anthology of teachings by English-speaking disciples of Ajahn Chah (Great Gaddesden: Amaravati Publications), p. 28.



10. A society in transition ISKCON's spiritual path

Anna S. King

ISKCON's beginnings: the tradition's journey West

The early years of ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, represents the story of a spectacular if unlikely success. Prabhupāda, the movement's founder *ācārya*, was aged 69 when he set sail from India, the place of his birth, arriving in New York nearly penniless and alone late in 1965. By 1977, the year of his death, he had initiated more than 9,000 devotees and had created an organization with centres, temples and farms across the globe.¹

This was not easily done. Prabhupāda was sometimes seriously ill. He had never before visited the West and sometimes he found the culture extremely alien. Previously he had only initiated one disciple. He was by many accounts not an outstanding preacher or lecturer. At first his English was not easy for his American followers to understand. He had attended the Scottish Churches' College in Calcutta and his accent reflected this. After a period of initial euphoria the embryonic movement faced considerable opposition and anti-cult hysteria. Internally his young adherents were largely ignorant of the rich Indian devotional tradition Prabhupāda intended to convey. Their enthusiasm was often matched by their immaturity, and mistakes and misjudgements inevitably followed.

How then are we to account for what Harvey Cox called 'this stunning accomplishment'?² It was not because Prabhupāda offered an easy path, a watered down form of spirituality. Initiated devotees had to make four vows: no meat, no illicit sex, no intoxicants, including tea, coffee and cigarettes, and no gambling. They received new Sanskrit names, men's heads were shaved leaving a *śikhā* (a tuft of hair at the back of the head), women were required to cover their



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heads. They were to wear Hindu traditional dress. Men donned saffron-coloured dhotis and kurtas, women wore saris. Using a threaded circle of 108 sacred chanting beads (*jāpa-mālā*), all were required to chant sixteen rounds of the Hare Krishna mantra each day. They lived communally, men and women separately, in ashrams attached to the local temple. Rising at 4 a.m., they were required to take cold showers, anoint their bodies on twelve locations with soft yellow clay from the sacred river Yamuna and engage as a community in four hours of devotions, consisting of *maṅgala-ārati* (Deity worship), obeisance in honouring the *tulasī* plant, chanting their rounds of the Hare Krishna *mahāmantra*, worship of the guru (*guru-pūjā*) and attending a class on the scriptures, especially the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*. In the early days characteristically many devotees engaged in street singing, dancing and chanting the Hare Krishna mantra, and in the dissemination and sale of Prabhupāda's books (*saṅkīrtana*). Above all, devotees had to be prepared for the personal surrender required in a guru-disciple relationship. Not everyone could sustain this demanding regime, but up to 3,000 continued, deepening their commitment as they progressed.

Obviously this disciplined lifestyle was not achieved overnight. Prabhupāda had slowly and painfully to teach his followers the details of every ritual and mode of appropriate behaviour. But, using a gradualist approach, he persevered, and within a few years the originally chaotic life of the devotees had taken a firmly directed shape. It may have been this very demanding and secure structure that was part of the movement's early appeal. Many of the first Western converts in the late 1960s and early 1970s had come from the American counterculture, the hippie and flower people, with its emphasis on 'high' states of consciousness and finding its expression in rock music and the lyrics of groups like the Beatles. There was also among some young people a horror of the Vietnam War, an interest in Indian and Asian spirituality and a desire for a simpler, more communal and less materialistic lifestyle.³

Into this complex and volatile social situation came the Hare Krishnas with their warmth and enthusiasm, offering adherents a fresh identity as members of a new, simpler and disciplined community, that expressed the love of God seen as Krishna, that demanded obedience and sacrifice, that called for a deep emotional and devotional commitment and that provided a purpose to life that transcended material self-interest. Even more important to most



early devotees was the person of Prabhupāda whom they saw as a deeply pious and spiritual person.⁴ This does not mean he was not autocratic and could not make mistakes. Sometimes he had to reverse his judgements and he certainly expected his devotees to do as he asked. But his authority was conveyed with a spirit of humility. It caused George Harrison, the Beatle who became a major benefactor of the movement, to comment that Prabhupāda saw himself as the servant of the servant of the servant of Krishna.⁵

It was not only the person and character of Prabhupāda that devotees found attractive. This was combined with the message he was trying to convey. Indeed, Shinn, after interviewing more than a hundred converts, found that the 'philosophy' which Prabhupāda taught was in the majority of cases one of the critical factors if not *the* critical factor in their conversion to ISKCON. 'What Prabhupāda provided for his young disciples was an alternative and specifically detailed Indian theistic interpretation of the world to satisfy the religious questions they were raising.'⁶

Of course, what Prabhupāda taught was not something entirely new. Much of what he had to say came directly from mainstream *sanātan dharm* and was confidently claimed to be based on Vedic teaching. But it was interpreted through the lenses of the strongly devotional theistic *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* faith and inspired by the example of the sixteenth-century *Vaiṣṇava* saint Caitanya. The latter had demonstrated his ecstatic commitment to Krishna by leading his followers in singing, dancing and chanting the praises of Krishna through the towns and villages of Bengal. Prabhupāda himself was an initiated disciple of Bhaktisiddhānta Sarasvati, who together with his father Bhaktivinoda Ṭhākura had helped revitalize the *Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava* movement in Bengal in the late nineteenth century. Many of the innovations that marked Prabhupāda's mission to the West can be traced back to the influence of these two men. Indeed it was Bhaktisiddhānta who had originally directed Prabhupāda to carry the message of Krishna consciousness to the West.⁷ Yet it required the genius of Prabhupāda to translate these aspirations into successful practice and actual institutions in the West.

The society in transition: tradition and innovation

It is now over twenty years since the death of Prabhupāda and



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ISKCON endeavours to hold its own on the religious world stage. It has suffered the inevitable vicissitudes of any modern religious movement and has had to sustain the trauma and upsets associated with the loss of its founder. Yet though the early days of rapid and enthusiastic advance may have gone, they have been replaced by a period of consolidation and growing maturity. In a word, ISKCON has become increasingly institutionalized.

ISKCON remains a loose federation of centres, temples and farming communities scattered throughout the world, and is strongest in North America, Europe (especially Britain) and more recently in India. In total there are 300 centres, eighty restaurants and forty farm communities. Each area, indeed each temple, is financially and legally autonomous. This means that there is a certain amount of flexibility and difference between the various centres. The overall spiritual management is by means of a Governing Body Commission (GBC). There are also a number of initiating gurus, something begun by Prabhupāda when he appointed eleven devotees just before his death to fulfil this role. Resolving the inevitable difficult tensions between the GBC and the initiating gurus has been one of the most challenging and traumatic problems facing ISKCON in recent years, especially when some gurus failed to live up to their calling.⁸

Alongside these developments in the management of ISKCON there have been major changes in the character of its membership, which are radically affecting the spiritual life being developed in its individual communities. As we have seen, ISKCON originally consisted of close-knit communities made up mainly of unmarried, celibate young people, mostly Westerners, living, working and worshipping together as *brahmacarīs* and *brahmacarinīs*, engaged in the full-time service of Krishna, and sharing resources and finances, dependent on the temple for their livelihood and shelter. Spiritual progress was tied to this communal life, and relationships to the outside world except for missionary activity were intentionally curtailed and sometimes hostile.

Ashrams of *brahmacarīs* and *brahmacarinīs* still exist, but they are now very much in the minority in a membership largely made up of married devotees and their children living and working outside the confines of the community. 'The nuclear family has effectively displaced communalism as the movement's foundational structure of social organisation in most parts of the world.'⁹ Even at



Bhaktivedanta Manor, ISKCON's main centre in this country, where there are still sizeable *brahmacarī* and *brahmacarinī* ashrams, the majority of devotees are married and, together with increasing numbers of supporters only loosely tied to ISKCON, live off site.

This move from community to congregation, reflected both in the day-to-day life and in the aims and objectives of institutions such as Bhaktivedanta Manor, is calling for some hard thinking within the organization. Some see such developments as a retreat from its true purposes. The majority perceive them as inevitable and welcome consequences of the movement's growing maturity, offering new and influential ways of reaching into and challenging conventional society. As Dayā Dāsī, a German devotee, comments, 'The role of the temple, or *āśrama* has ... changed. ISKCON centres are now primarily places of education, worship and mission. Vaiṣṇavas receive their spiritual education in the temple, after which most of them marry and establish a family.'¹⁰ The temple has turned from home to college and religious retreat, and the self-descriptions of Bhaktivedanta Manor reflect this fact.

Second, there has occurred what has been called the Indianization of the Hare Krishna movement.¹¹ This has happened most noticeably in North America and Britain, both countries where there are sizeable Indian minorities. Even more obvious is the growth of ISKCON in India where the Society is engaged on a series of ambitious building projects. Devotees increasingly talk of India as their spiritual homeland and aspire to visit Prabhupāda's *Samādhi* in Vṛndāvana.

This major participation of the wider Hindu community in the activities of the Hare Krishna movement is very visible at Bhaktivedanta Manor. After some hesitation Hindus have taken the movement to their hearts and the temple there has become recognized as a place of pilgrimage. I spoke to several families who had come from Leicester and further north to have *darśan* of the deities in the shrine. One of these families had brought relatives visiting from India specially to see the Manor. 'It is a place of such tranquillity and peace.' And this in spite of the obvious noise and bustle. The temple worship, especially during the weekends, is crowded with such visitors and supporters, tens of thousands throng the site on great festival days and large numbers took part this year in the Hare Krishna procession in central London on the occasion of the Chariot Festival of Lord Jagannāth.



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Not all the Hindus from the wider community who come to Bhaktivedanta Manor are adherents of ISKCON. They are attracted by the devout and authentic worship of Krishna, and by the ambience and friendliness of the Manor. The very high quality of worship, not always found elsewhere, is enhanced by the presence of numbers of highly trained *pūjāris*. Also attractive to the wider Hindu population are teaching programmes and music which appeal to the younger generation and which at the same time reassure parents that their children are being taught their faith in an acceptable and intelligible manner.

This has challenged members of a community who have not always wanted to think of themselves as Hindus but have preferred to think of themselves in more universalist terms and have sought to keep very distinct their Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava faith. Nevertheless, such support from the wider Hindu community is growing. Numbers are becoming committed members of ISKCON and now make up about one-third of the full-time devotees at Bhaktivedanta Manor. Others contribute to the running of the Manor and its temple through a Board of Patrons. With this active participation come many generous donations that support the work of ISKCON in this country as well as elsewhere.

Such massive support has not been without its difficulties. For fifteen years Bhaktivedanta Manor was engaged in a long-running, extremely expensive and often acrimonious dispute with Hertsmere Council over the public worship being held at the temple in the Manor.¹² The heart of the problem was this large influx of Indian visitors. Not until 1996 was the dispute settled and only after a large-scale struggle that enlisted the support of the wider Indian Hindu community. Its unintended consequence has been to make the worship and facilities at the Manor even more widely known and to attract still stronger Indian Hindu support.¹³

In addition to Bhaktivedanta Manor there are now about twenty ISKCON centres in the British Isles. Most are quite small. In Britain the two largest and most significant are the Manor, and the temple and vegetarian restaurant in Soho, London, though there has recently been a further significant development with the creation in 1997 of the Centre for Vaishnava and Hindu Studies at Oxford, with Professor Klaus Klostermaier as its first Director of Academic Affairs.



Life within the community: *sādhana* in context

Set in the Hertfordshire countryside, Bhaktivedanta Manor was built at the turn of the century as a mock Tudor-style manor house. An attractive and tranquil estate, it originally consisted of seventeen acres of park and farmland, lake and gardens which has recently been increased to eighty acres. The whole inner complex is filled to overflowing with a variety of activities. At its heart is the temple worship of Krishna. Rooms used by Prabhupāda during his stays at the Manor have been kept as a shrine to the founder-*ācārya*, attracting large numbers of visitors and containing his life-sized sculptured form.

Ostensibly, the Manor functions as a theological college where adherents are trained at various levels as priests and for full-time work with the Society. There are also innumerable short and day courses run by an enthusiastic educational service, which encourages visits from schools and colleges and publishes materials for use in the classroom. The provision of a theatre makes possible the frequent production of religious dramas, both traditional and contemporary. In the grounds there is a *gośāla* (cowshelter), where principles of cow protection, an activity cherished by most pious Hindus, are put into practice. A greenhouse grows the sacred *tulasī* plant used in worship and for the production of chanting beads. To encourage vegetarianism a shop sells delicious *sātvic* food and there is large-scale distribution of *prasād* of a very high standard to visitors and residents alike. A bookshop makes available the many publications of ISKCON, especially the writings of Prabhupāda. There is also a small day primary school based on ISKCON principles which functions for devotees' children, its facilities also being used as a Sunday school. Work camps are held to encourage the participation of young people, as does the existence of a rock band. Pressure on space is enormous, and several small buildings have been purchased to house some of these many activities. A book distribution programme is carried out by a group of *brahmacarīs*. In partnership with the temple at Soho, free food (*prasādam*) is distributed to the homeless three times a week in poorer areas of central London. This free 'food for life' programme is characteristic of ISKCON's work in many parts of the world.

Behind all these and other evidences of a vigorous and innovatory religious institution and informing its activities at their best lies the



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central spiritual purpose of ISKCON, to re-awaken Krishna consciousness and so increase devotees' service and love of God. There will always be a gap between aspiring spirituality and its social expression in religious institutions, and it would be impossible for Bhaktivedanta Manor to be free of such tensions and contradictions, between economic reality and religious idealism and between personal frailties and spiritual goals. In this context the fate of institutions can often depend on the quality of its leadership. While ISKCON as an international body has experienced serious difficulties over this since the death of Prabhupāda, ISKCON's work in Britain is led by Śivarāma Mahārāja, an exceptional guru and member of the GBC, a Canadian of Hungarian extraction, who as well as possessing considerable administrative skills, is able to inspire and motivate devotees.

The spiritual path – its theological foundations

It is not possible in a short space to do full justice to the complex theological and ideological network of beliefs that inform and inspire the life of ISKCON communities such as Bhaktivedanta Manor. Tamal Krishna Goswami offers a succinct and brief outline of their basic features:

- (1) Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Personality of Godhead, with complete majesty, beauty, wisdom and power, the basis of the impersonal Brahman described by the *Upaniṣads*, the Supreme Self of the *yoga-sūtras*, the origin of innumerable expansions and *avatāras*.
- (2) As individual souls – being one with Kṛṣṇa in quality but vastly disparate in quantity – we were originally with Kṛṣṇa, but due to misuse of our free will, have been separated from Him since time immemorial.
- (3) *Bhakti-yoga*, devotional service, is the means by which we may revive our eternal, knowledgeable and ever blissful nature; end the circle of repeated birth and death; and return home, back to Godhead.¹⁴

It is possible to see in this the main features of ISKCON belief that helps to explain its *sādhana*, the spiritual pathway to which devotees aspire. The Godhead, Krishna, is personal in nature and our broken relationship with him can be restored through devotional service.



Such a restoration will not remove our permanent individuality, for this would deprive us of 'ever achieving the ultimate bliss of service to God'. This contrasts with the views of monistic Vedantists to whom Prabhupāda was strongly opposed. What prevents our restoration and traps us in the repeated circle of birth and death is our entanglement with material existence, for our essential self, our soul, is not our physical body. It is finding and using the appropriate means of escaping this entrapment and achieving this restoration of our original Krishna consciousness that is the major aim of ISKCON devotees not just for themselves but for all sentient creatures.

The spiritual path – its practical expression

How then in practical terms is this restoration of our original Krishna consciousness to be gained and sustained in the context of a community like Bhaktivedanta Manor? To Prabhupāda it would be inconceivable that spiritual development could be achieved in isolation. An orderly and devoted life within the community is the way to spiritual realization.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SPIRITUAL MASTER

First, the devotee must be the acknowledged disciple of a chosen guru. In Bhaktivedanta Manor disciples of many gurus from around the world can be found, partly because of the propensity of devotees to travel from centre to centre. Recently, an unusually large group of devotees was initiated at the Manor, thirty-one in number, an occasion of great rejoicing; but overall, far fewer such initiations are taking place.

In the Vaiṣṇava tradition of which ISKCON is a part the relationship of the devotee to his or her guru is undoubtedly of primary significance. Initiation by means of a chosen guru involves a deliberate act of submission or surrender. The guru is not God, but nevertheless he acts as the *via media* between his disciples and the Godhead. The guru is the recipient of worship by the disciple as the 'external manifestation of Krishna', but in turn he 'is expected to renounce and "transmit" that worship on to the Lord himself'.¹⁵ Prabhupāda strongly insisted on these procedures and would allow no exceptions.

Many devotees comment on how hard it is to sustain such a



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surrender. In the case of ISKCON this has been made more difficult by the failure of some of the original gurus appointed by Prabhupāda. Some older disciples at the Manor reported that because of this they had found it necessary to be reinitiated several times, though in spite of the shock this had caused it did not seem to have lessened to any great extent their belief in the system. Some devotees, however, were appalled, and in consequence left the movement. Yet where the relationship has been sustained, devotees often talk in warm terms of their guru relationship and value this personal link in devotion.

AUTHORITATIVE WRITINGS

The scriptures also play a crucial role in awakening Krishna consciousness. Reading them is not optional. Prabhupāda comments, 'Practising the yoga without reading the standard literature is simply a waste of time.'¹⁶ Though ISKCON accepts all the Vedic scriptures, its essential texts are primarily the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, both being understood as extolling Krishna as the Supreme Personality of the Godhead.

'For Prabhupāda, scripture is divinely inspired, hence, infallible.'¹⁷ Yet that leaves unanswered the question, 'What does it mean?' Prabhupāda advocates three interpretive procedures. First, all the Vedic literature celebrates the glories of Krishna and so can offer a unified revelation. Second, reliable meaning is given only by recognized or bona fide conveyors of the tradition. Third, such commentators must, as well as being true to previous *ācāryas*, take account of present needs. They must be aware of time, place and circumstance. Both traditional authority and innovation must be given space. The purpose is not dazzling erudition but the personal realization of Krishna consciousness of the reader.

In pursuit of these objectives Prabhupāda spent enormous effort in producing detailed commentaries on the main ISKCON scriptures. Indeed, he sometimes spoke as if his main bequest to his followers were his books. His task was considerable. He had not only to translate from languages which the large majority of Western devotees could not understand, but he also had to explain his translations to those whose thought forms were shaped by a very different culture. He has also bequeathed many volumes of his other writings and recorded conversations to his followers.



How far devotees actually read his commentaries is difficult to discover. It is certainly a recognized practice for devotees to spend at least a short time daily in devotional reading (*śravanam*), something encouraged at the Manor. Prabhupāda himself urged his followers to read his writings and the Society, through its publications and classes held daily in every temple, constantly directs attention to his teachings as authoritative. The tradition is strongly not to read the scriptures on their own but embedded in his commentaries.

Recently, present-day senior gurus have begun to produce their own commentaries building on the work of Prabhupāda and earlier *ācāryas*. So at Bhaktivedanta Manor Śivarāma Swami is now conducting devotional classes based on *Veṇu-gīta, The Song of the Flute*, his commentary on *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, Chapter 10, verse 21.¹⁸ Devotees' attention is drawn to the details of the pastimes, the *līlās* of Krishna in Vṛndāvan, reflecting His *līlās* with liberated souls in His transcendental world, *Goloka-Vṛndāvan*. The objective is a height-ening of Krishna consciousness, not an indirect lesson in morality.

DANCING WITH KRISHNA

It is not only through the spiritual master and scriptures authentically understood that devotees meet with Krishna. Devotional service, as Prabhupāda translates *bhakti*, goes much further than this. In temple worship the devotee daily encounters Krishna directly. 'The sacred image ... is viewed not as a mere symbol or representation of Krishna, but as Krishna Himself ... allowing Himself to be approached in an immediate and personal way.'¹⁹

At Bhaktivedanta Manor much care and resources are expended on the temple shrine and temple worship. The installed deities, Shree Shree Radha-Gokulananda and Shree Shree Sita-Rama-Laxman-Hanuman, are treated with exquisite care. The temple day begins at 4.30 a.m. when *maṅgalā āratī* is performed by *pūjāris*, a highly formalized form of worship, while at the same time the devotees greet the Divine with songs and dancing accompanied with drums and cymbals.

The *jāpa* or chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra that follows is considered by many devotees to be the most important part of the morning devotions. Such chanting, which devotees will often



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continue at other moments during the day, is seen as the best way to approach Krishna directly. For the name of God is non-different from Krishna Himself. Chanting the name with devout intentions awakens the soul to its proper purpose, bringing the worshipper into the presence of God. Reflecting a general feeling, one devotee suffering a recurrence of breast cancer told me she found great comfort in her chanting, and in fact used thirty-two not sixteen as the number of rounds of her chants each day.

TIMES OF CELEBRATION

Both festivals and fasts form part of the annual rhythm of life of any ISKCON community, a balance between austerity and celebration, discipline and bliss. Festivals in particular are treated as joyous occasions and are seen as a major way of reaching a wider public. So at Bhaktivedanta Manor on great festival days, such as *Krishna Janmasthan*, the birthday of Krishna, tens of thousands attend, mainly it must be said from the Indian Hindu constituency. The temple is lovingly and lavishly decorated. Large and colourful exhibitions of the adventures of Krishna and the mission of Prabhupāda engage the visitors' attention. Free *prasād* is widely distributed. There are bazaars, stalls, face-painting, divine kitchens, etc. The *līlā* or pastimes of Krishna and the teaching of ISKCON are conveyed by means of plays, dance-dramas, music and multi-media presentations as well as through temple worship and public *kīrtans*.

THE BEAUTIFUL GOD

The Krishna encountered by devotees through all these activities is no abstraction. 'Instead God is a wondrously beautiful youth with lotus-petal eyes, skin tinged with the hue of blue clouds, a mischievously enchanting smile, a peacock feather in his hair and a flower garland round His neck . . . He is worshipped not in awe but in love.'²⁰ The awe-inspiring theophanies of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* are balanced by the flute-playing lover of the *gopīs* of Vṛndāvana.

This unashamed recognition of the transcendental nature of beauty is reflected in devotees' confident use of artistic gifts to express their devotion and worship. In Bhaktivedanta Manor,



painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance and drama are brought into the service of Krishna. Appeal to sound, taste and smell as well as sight and movement enrich the ceremonial worship of the deities. The aesthetic sense is not denied but believed to be enhanced and refined through devotional activity. As one gifted artist devotee at Bhaktivedanta Manor remarked, 'My chanting helps give my painting a depth it would otherwise lack.'

PRASĀDAM – FOOD FOR LIFE

Food has a special importance in ISKCON communities, for it has potentially a sacramental character. Sanctified food nourishes the soul. First, it must be of the right kind and cooked in the correct way. Second, such pure food must be sanctified by offering it in devotion for the pleasure of the Lord. So all food consumed at Bhaktivedanta Manor is first offered to Krishna. Of special spiritual potency is food directly offered to Krishna during the morning *ārati* ceremony (*mahā prasādam*).

But this is only part of the story. ISKCON institutions take great pleasure in producing excellent food, and Bhaktivedanta Manor is no exception to this rule. Most temples provide free vegetarian feasts on Sundays and many run successful vegetarian restaurants. Among Bhaktivedanta Manor's most popular courses are those on vegetarian cooking. All this is not because of gourmet interest or just to encourage vegetarianism. It is believed that in consuming food dedicated to Krishna, Krishna Himself is encountered and so not only is the body nourished, but spiritual benefits flow as well. In the light of this, ISKCON's worldwide free distribution of vegetarian food to the needy takes on a new dimension. As *prasādam* it is food both for the body and the soul.

Conclusion

ISKCON has come a long way from the freezing cold days in New York in 1965 when Prabhupāda gathered around him his few newly initiated devotees. From this embryo it has grown into a worldwide religious movement. Its development represents the rare achievement of a faith being successfully transposed from one culture to another,



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from a Hindu India to a secular West and now wider still. In its progress it has had to survive some wild storms and the death of its founder *ācārya*. There are signs that in spite of or perhaps through these experiences it is coming of age, something that is reflected in the thriving activities at Bhaktivedanta Manor.

ISKCON is becoming much more reflective as it matures as a religious society. Firmly committed to the teaching of Prabhupāda, it is much more ready to be critical of its own history and to rethink its approach to contemporary issues. The contrast could not be more marked than that between the defensive and tendentious attitudes so vividly conveyed by Nori Muster²¹ of the ten-year period following Prabhupāda's death and the open, honest and reflective attitudes recorded in the present-day scholarly journal of the movement, *ISKCON Communications Journal*.

There can, for example, be few if any religious groups that have been so honest as ISKCON about evidence of child abuse in its own ranks and its methods of dealing with them.²² Similar transformations can be traced in ISKCON attitudes to other religious groups: from a position, in practice if not in theory, of often mutual hostility and suspicion to one as expressed in a recent ISKCON policy document which is a model of respect, reconciliation and dialogue.²³

Problems remain. Given its changed circumstances, what kind of community should it be attempting to build?²⁴ In spite of continued discussion, the role of women in ISKCON is still a matter of debate and contested practice.²⁵ The internet gives the opportunity for all manner of wild rumours to gain currency and acrimonious debates to occur, in ISKCON's case from disputes about guru succession to recent fantastic allegations about the poisoning of Prabhupāda.

Yet in spite of these difficulties and perplexities the spiritual life embedded in ISKCON continues to flourish. The lives of many devotees may be changing, but all the evidence from such centres as Bhaktivedanta Manor suggests that their love and service to Krishna remains as a living reality.

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11. The Amish

Case study of a religious community

Richard Stevick

Background to the community

Although their total population is less than 200,000, the Amish are probably North America's best-known Christian minority, instantly recognizable by their plain attire, horse-drawn transportation, and rejection of high technology and mass entertainment. Despite their renunciation of Hollywood, the media have embraced the Amish and exported their images around the world.¹

For whatever reason, non-Amish, known collectively as 'English' to the Amish, have been intrigued with this unique cultural group. In some years more than three million tourists visit Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, home of the oldest Amish settlement. Many drive through the back roads and byways to gaze at bearded Amish farmers working their fields with horse-drawn equipment or watch barefoot Amish children hoeing corn. Books and articles on Amish life and culture have proliferated almost as fast as the booming Amish population. From coast to coast, newspapers routinely run articles covering Amish society and feature photos of Amish carriages, families on their way to church, or smiling Amish teenage girls on in-line skates. Films like Paramount Pictures' *Witness* may succeed visually by portraying images of barn-raising, beards and bonnets, but fail to capture the essence of their spiritual life – their belief in God which impacts who they are, what they value, and how they live.

When outsiders contemplate Amish religious life, they often react very differently. At one extreme are the romanticizers who view the Amish with a mixture of incredulity and awe, equating them to living relics from a distant past. They marvel that some people in a



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postmodern world still adhere to absolutes and pay more than lip-service to family, community and moral values. They are intrigued by a values-based society that produces a strong work ethic, intact families, no divorce, and little crime and delinquency.

On the other hand, some fundamentalist or evangelical Christians criticize the Amish for practising a 'legalistic religion', a rule-oriented faith based simply on adherence to their traditional *Ordnung* or set of rules. These critics believe that Amish religious life is frequently characterized by pettiness and hair-splitting, deep divisions, and harsh exclusion of the disobedient. Some evangelicals are especially critical of the Old Order Amish who believe that expressing certainty of one's salvation in this life is prideful and therefore refuse to evangelize non-believers. They charge the Amish with practising a hollow faith as described in the scriptures, 'having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof'.² To them, Amish religious expression is flawed, as evidenced by their absence of zeal in testifying, evangelizing and speaking experientially of God. Others accuse the Amish of simply being more concerned that their children remain Amish than that 'they have a genuine relationship with the Lord'. Many evangelicals are also offended that some Amish grow and use tobacco.

Although these critiques may contain elements of truth, each alone is decidedly deficient. The Amish are too complex to fit such simplistic generalizations. Part of the complexity in understanding them stems from a decentralized rather than a monolithic organizational structure. Therefore, even though all Amish may look similar to the untrained eye, significant diversity of practice exists among their communities. For example, in Holmes County, Ohio, at least six different Amish affiliations or distinctive groups co-exist. They range from the ultra-conservative Swartzentruber Amish who reject most modern technology to the progressive New Order Amish who may have electricity in their barns or houses, telephones in their shops, and tractors in their fields.³

However, differences among affiliations transcend external characteristics and reflect what each group regards as moral or immoral behaviour within their settlements and churches. For example, the affiliation now known as the New Order Amish originated in the 1960s, splitting from the Old Order over moral issues, especially as they related to acceptable behaviour among the youth. New Order founders objected to several Old Order practices



common then, such as bed courtship or bundling, a tradition in which courting couples were permitted to lie together fully clothed in bed. The New Order breakaway group also adopted more intentional practices not usually found among Old Order groups, such as Sunday School and Wednesday night church gatherings for the youth. Actually, these moral distinctives define the religious essence of the different types of communities more than do external characteristics.

Despite their differences, all Amish groups today are offshoots of the Reformation. Considering themselves neither Protestant nor Catholic, they are descendants of the conservative wing of the radical reformation known as the Anabaptists. This movement followed on the heels of Martin Luther's reformation in Germany in the early sixteenth century. Although the founders of Anabaptism shared Luther's belief in the ultimate authority of the scriptures ('sola scriptura') and in the repudiation of the Catholic Church, they believed that the Reformation failed to go far or deep enough.

These radical reformers maintained that only adults could enter into the fellowship of believers, thus repudiating the Lutheran and Reformed practice of infant baptism. They not only rebaptized each other but also required all converts to be rebaptized – hence earning the epithet 'Anabaptists', meaning 're-baptizers'. Hundreds were tortured for this belief, and many were burned at the stake by both Catholic and Protestant zealots. In addition, their refusal to serve in the military put them in conflict with the governments in Switzerland, Germany, France, Holland, Austria and Britain. Since baptismal records established the future tax rolls, civil authorities were incensed by the potential loss of taxpayers. In addition, because these radicals rejected all forms of violence, including involvement in the military, the state was losing future soldiers with which to fight the Ottoman Turkish infidels. As a result, the governments of these countries executed many Anabaptist dissidents. These persecutions of their ancestors are recounted in numerous songs in the Amish hymnal, *Ausbund*,⁴ and in the graphic narratives in *Martyrs' Mirror*,⁵ a book owned by virtually all Amish families.

Persecution of the Anabaptists waxed and waned over the first 150 years of their existence, depending on the whims of the current rulers. But bloodless internal conflicts also wracked the Anabaptists. Just over 300 years ago, these people (eventually known as Mennonites, named for Menno Simons, a converted Catholic priest)



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were confronted by Jakob Ammann, a stubborn Swiss Anabaptist minister. Ammann concluded that the main church had grown soft on important issues such as separation from the world, communion and excommunication. He brashly charged these early Mennonites to either discipline lax ministers and members or face excommunication by Ammann and his followers. Eventually, the conservative Ammann group and the main body split over these differences. The conservatives became the Amish.

Less than fifty years later in 1736, twenty-one Amish families left Europe for Philadelphia, the vanguard of many Amish arrivals who would subsequently settle in Pennsylvania and beyond. This first wave soon established settlements in nearby Berks and Lancaster Counties, Pennsylvania, on land patents granted to the sons of the English Quaker, William Penn.⁶

Because of past persecution, migration and defection, the Amish are extinct in Europe today. In North America, however, they have shown a remarkable ability to persist and even thrive. In spite of their tenuous beginnings they may be the fastest growing Anabaptist group in North America. Their nearly 200,000 men, women and children are scattered throughout more than 1,000 church districts in 250 settlements in more than two dozen states and in Ontario, Canada.⁷

Amish teachings and lifestyle

A knowledge of Amish history is helpful in understanding some of their present practices and values. Most importantly, the Amish have always attempted to base their lives on their literal understanding of the Bible, especially the New Testament. Their opposition to war and retaliation,⁸ their refusal to take oaths, and their commitment to a simple and quiet life, stem from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. They base their practice of excommunication and shunning⁹ of wayward church members on Saint Paul's New Testament letters, support a patriarchal organization of the home and church, and require that females, married or single, cover their heads. Since they believe that the Bible clearly teaches these things, they see no need for Anabaptist theologians or apologists to come forward to defend their practices. 'We speak about such things to the outside world only when asked,' explained an Amish octogenarian.

They also understand the scriptures to teach non-conformity to



the world.¹⁰ Broad-brimmed hats and bonnets, suspenders and aprons, straight pins, hooks and eyes instead of buttons and distinctive grooming serve to separate them from the non-Amish. In the twentieth century, separation also translated into the rejection of 'worldly' technologies and practices, such as car-ownership, power-line electricity, commercial insurance and telephones in the house. As Kraybill points out, the Amish do not automatically equate modern technology with sinful practices but seek to limit anything which they judge to weaken or corrupt the community.¹¹

The sufferings of their ancestors profoundly affect the Amish to this day. For example, the persecution they experienced undoubtedly contributes to their persistent support for the separation of church and state. In addition, most Amish are wary of government, and few vote in state and national elections. They follow the biblical injunction to pay taxes, but they have been exempted from the federal social security system and rarely accept unemployment or health assistance from the government. In most places, their distrust extends to school boards and consolidated schools. In fact, one reason they limit their children's education to eight grades is their fear of losing control to the secularizing influence of higher education.

Other aspects of their past also influence Amish society. They started out as hard-working farmers in northern Europe, and when they emigrated to America they maintained their love for rural life, their passion for agriculture and their German work ethic. Even today, farming is regarded as the ideal occupation, and the farm is considered to be an especially fine setting to rear children. Parents can always find work for their children to do on the farm. However, as the Amish population increases and available farmland diminishes, more fathers must seek employment in shops or factories. Consequently, they fear that family life will be adversely affected and that children will not learn to be good workers. For the Amish, honest work has almost achieved the position of a sacrament. They believe that work was ordained by God from the beginning and that work, well done, glorifies God. Conversely, an idle mind and idle hands offer Satan a foothold to lead one astray.

The church, next to the extended family, is the most important institution in Amish society. For the Amish, the church or church district, as it is called, is not a building but consists of a congregation of baptized members from twenty-five to forty families living in the



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same geographic area. Unless individuals marry or move away, they attend church all their lives with the same friends, neighbours and relatives with whom they have grown up. Every able-bodied person is expected to attend, from babes in arms to great-grandparents in wheelchairs. Districts are led by a deacon, one or two ministers and a bishop, local men who are nominated by all the members and are then chosen by lot, a practice described in the New Testament church.¹² When one is chosen, he must accept and serve without pay for life.

Tradition impacts all of Amish society, but perhaps it is most pronounced in the form and content of their bi-weekly worship service. Since worship is the least changed aspect of Amish life, attending a three-hour Amish church service in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, may give one a sense of moving into a time warp – of entering a sixteenth-century Peter Brueghel painting. Clad in their Sunday best, men and boys alike wear broad-brimmed hats and dress in traditional black broadfall pants, black vests, suspenders and white shirts. The women and girls wear organdie head-coverings over their long hair. They wear plain dresses of blues, purples, browns, or greens under their capes and aprons. Except for young children, the sexes are segregated, and the worshippers sit together by age.

Since the scriptures make no mention of church buildings, the Amish have chosen to worship where they live or work – in houses, barns or shops. Worshipping in these everyday surroundings may reduce the distance between secular and sacred. Despite this mundane setting, Amish services in some respects still reflect their Catholic origins in that their order of worship is always fixed and formal. At one point, worshippers actually genuflect. The congregants file in quietly by age and sex and sit in silence until the first hymn is announced. Nobody speaks or prays audibly except for the ministers and those men who are chosen by the bishop to attest to the truth or error of the message following the sermon. 'But lots of silent prayers ascend to the Lord after singing,' one great-grandfather explained.

Traditionally, the congregation sings a capella and in unison, and a four-verse hymn with its decelerated tempo may last for twenty minutes. All hymns, prayers and scriptures are written in the sixteenth-century High German Fraktur script which Martin Luther used to translate the Bible. Over the centuries, this language has



assumed a quasi-sacred status, and it is never spoken in daily discourse. Therefore, the challenge for many Amish, especially the youth, is similar to moderns trying to understand Chaucerian English. A 25-year-old Amish man confessed, 'At church I understand very little of the scripture readings and hymns in High German.'

Amish ministers always preach in the German or Swiss vernacular, their first language, but the preaching lasts for an hour or an hour and a half, well beyond the attention span of most adults, let alone children and youth. In the plainest settlements, many ministers still preach in the old-fashioned singsong or chant-like style, rarely establishing eye contact with the faithful. A few even preach with their eyes closed. Since there is no nursery or junior church, all infants, children and youth attend the adult-centred services along with their grandparents, parents, siblings and neighbours, hearing the same sermons and singing the same songs as the adults. Finally, everyone must endure the same discomfort of cramped seating, hard benches and, depending on the season, a hot, stuffy room, a dusty barn or a drafty, chilly shop. Despite these conditions, one hundred per cent of the children and most of the youth attend church regularly.

Outsiders who are accustomed to the compartmentalization of secular and religious in mainstream society might assume that in the highly structured Amish society, every facet of the community would be organized strictly to indoctrinate children and youth in the tenets of Amish faith and practice – perhaps resembling David Koresh's Waco compound or Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. But Kraybill believes that for a religious culture that strives to leave little to chance or to the outside world in the socialization of the young, most Amish receive relatively little *formal* religious instruction in the home or even in the parochial Amish schools.

Amish parents believe that strong family life is the seedbed for nourishing spiritual and community values. Most parents make their family a central priority. A strong attachment to their children permits them to 'prepare the soil', plant the seeds of faith and nurture the spiritual development of their families. Of course, they frequently admonish their children to obey God and their parents, revere the scriptures, recognize God as the creator and sustainer of life, and submit themselves to Christ and the teachings of the Bible.

Although parents are not to be the final interpreter of scriptures,



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they typically admonish their children to live carefully and faithfully. One Amish father recalled his parents' words of forty years ago:

God sees what we do. ... He can see into our hearts. ... When we do wrong, it is sin. ... Don't lie. ... Don't harm others. ... Play nice with other children. ... Keep yourself clean. ... Look constantly to God. ... Remember that Christ has the forgiveness for sins.

Most Amish believe that faith and faithfulness are absorbed as much from the social 'landscape' of daily life as from the formal times of worship in church or devotions in the home. 'Children hear their parents and other adults discussing religious themes when they are visiting or travelling together,' explained a bishop. 'Faith is more caught than taught.'

Even so, many households routinely start or end the day by reading a passage from the Bible and a prayer from the *Die Ernesthafte Christenpflicht* prayer-book.¹³ As in church, fathers typically read both the scripture and prayer in High German, and family prayers are rarely extemporaneous. In most Old Order settlements, parents are expected to use the off-Sunday as their own family Sunday School (*Sonntag Schul*), reading the Bible and memorizing Bible verses in English or German, and praying together. Even there, however, many parents typically do not emphasize the interpretation of biblical passages. Religious discussions are more appropriate among adults, and the final interpretation comes from the ordained ministers in communal worship. Parents are expected to teach their children in the 'nurture and admonition of the Lord',¹⁴ provide a loving Christian family, and be faithful examples to the children.

In most Old Order communities formal religious instruction begins only after the youth have made the most important decision to join the church. Depending on the settlement or affiliation, the movement towards church membership starts at around age 16 when the youth begin to attend the weekly or bi-weekly Sunday evening singing socials. By this point, they are considered to be at or approaching the 'age of accountability', fully knowing right from wrong and understanding the implications of their choices and behaviours.

In some of the large communities, a significant minority of youth deviates from the teachings of their parents and church to venture out into the world and indulge in 'worldly behaviours'. This may



include dressing 'English', driving or owning a car, going to the cinema or other worldly venues, and drinking heavily. In 1998, two young men who grew up in Amish homes pleaded guilty to charges of selling cocaine and speed to other Amish youth. Most parents express deep concern for this 'sowing of wild oats', as they call it.

The youth are increasingly admonished by the bishops and ministers to avoid the temptations of sin, reject the world, the flesh and the devil, and count the cost of becoming a baptized member of the church. The leaders also remind the parents to encourage their eligible children to begin taking membership instruction. The actual age at which young people join the church varies. In most Old Order groups, females almost always join earlier than males, and youth in small, isolated settlements or New Order churches typically join at a younger age than do youth in the larger settlements.

After declaring their intentions to become baptized members, the young people are instructed to put aside their worldly ways and begin to prepare for lifetime church membership. The candidates receive membership instruction from the local ordained leaders. On a designated church Sunday morning, these youth join the bishop and ministers in a separate council room during the first hymn. For the next sixteen to twenty weeks, they will meet for instruction every other Sunday during the first thirty or forty minutes of the worship service. Each candidate affirms, 'I am a seeker desiring to be part of this church of God.'

In most districts, sessions are devoted to explaining the eighteen articles of the Dortrecht Confession, two articles per class. This 1632 Dutch Anabaptist document summarizes the historic beliefs and practices, which continue to this day.¹⁵ Although these youth may not initially know every scriptural reference or be able to recall every point, they have been repeatedly exposed to virtually all the materials covered in the Confession from past sermons at church and conversations at home.

The articles begin with the foundational belief of God the Creator and proceed through the fall of man, the possibility of salvation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the son of God, and the second coming of Christ as the final judge. They also explain the basis for the Amish adherence to the typical Anabaptist practices of adult baptism, separation from the world, male and female roles in the church and the home, non-swearing of oaths, non-participation in the civil government, non-resistance,



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communion, feet washing, marriage within the Amish faith, excommunication, and shunning or social avoidance.

The impact of the community and its prospects for the future

Since candidates for church membership receive less than eight hours of formal religious instruction and the schools do not have an overt religious curriculum, one must look for other factors to explain how Amish communities and families are so successful in transmitting their faith. Although the clergy are responsible for the formal instruction of the youth, every adult in the community is expected to teach the faith through consistent living. Since the Amish believe that all of life has religious significance, it should be lived carefully and intentionally for the Lord. This involves life at home, in the community and at work.

At the heart of Amish spirituality is the ideal of giving up one's rights, will and pride to God's will, to divinely appointed leaders and to the community of faith. Amish scholars use the German word *Gelassenheit*¹⁶ to capture the idea of renunciation and submission. Such submission to God's sovereignty might strike modern thinkers as being medieval or fatalistic. For example, most Amish are likely to accept that droughts, tornadoes and accidents come from God's hand just as much as the daily blessings of fine weather, prosperity and good health. During the hard times, they acknowledge His chastening hand and sustaining grace. At all times they see evidence of Him in the cycles of life, the circles of the seasons, their daily work and their 'lot in life'.

Amish men further demonstrate their submission through their absolute acceptance of the lifetime call to ministry if the lot should fall upon them. Women likewise agree to submit to the 'headship' of their husbands. Twice each year, at the semi-annual council meeting conducted by the bishop, all members publicly agree to abide by the church's *Ordnung*. After it is reviewed, each member must individually affirm that he or she will comply with those standards. A bishop explained, 'A member might admit that he doesn't fully agree with everything in the *Ordnung*, but he will offer to submit anyway in order to bring about peace.'

The Amish are the first to acknowledge that humility is too often only an ideal and that renunciation is too often deficient or absent.



They point to church splits, heavy-handed bishops and unforgiving members as sad examples of their failure to achieve their ideals. But they rarely attempt to gloss over these failings, either inside the community or with knowledgeable outsiders. 'We are human and have our share of pride and sin, just like everybody else,' is an often-heard confession. 'But we all must give ourselves up. You will never be sorry.'

Despite failures, this emphasis on the giving up of oneself is not lost on the children and youth. God's will, whether revealed through the Bible, the church or the ministerial lot, transcends personal preference or convenience. As parents submit themselves to the teaching and discipline of the church, they are in turn teaching their children about ultimate priorities, faith and commitments. 'Through precept and example' the soil has been prepared to nurture the seeds of faith and commitment. In addition, they learn that spirituality is far more a covenant with one another and God than some private religious commitment or experience.

The fact that the entire community authenticates and reaffirms their shared beliefs may help explain how the Amish have been so spectacularly successful in passing on their faith to the next generation. Most Amish and Anabaptist scholars estimate that between 80 and 90 per cent of Old Order young people make and keep their lifetime commitment to be Amish church members.¹⁷ In addition, when Amish youth in many communities 'sow their wild oats' by tasting and testing the world, they generally do so together with their Amish peers. Thus, even in their rebellion, most have not really rejected their Amish identity but rather perceive themselves as disobedient sons and daughters. They are not really challenging the validity of the *Ordnung*. Their ultimate rejection of the world and their return to obedience signifies their willingness to take the lifelong vows. 'We believe the scriptures which say that if you train up a child in the way he should go, when he is old he will not depart from it,' explained a father.¹⁸

Nevertheless, virtually all Amish would affirm that neither family, nor choice, nor community life, nor the security of tradition are adequate foundations for their group to survive. They point to their religious faith as the centre for who they are and what they do. They find it unthinkable that the Amish could continue without the centrality of that faith. 'When seekers from the outside come to us wanting to be Amish,' explained a bishop, 'they are often attracted



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for the wrong reasons. They have fallen in love with what they think is a simpler way of life. What they fail to recognize is that our faith in Christ is at the core. Horses, buggies and kerosene lanterns will quickly grow stale without the faith foundation.' That religious centre is a powerful magnet that holds the faithful and draws wandering youth back to the fold.

Their faith also prompts the Amish to stand for what they believe, even when such a stance is costly. Since they believe that Christians should not go to court, they will endure fraud and exploitation rather than bring a suit against someone who has wronged them. On the other hand, they will doggedly resist the state when pressured to violate their convictions. For example, during the First World War, many Amish young men went to prison rather than serve in the military, and in the 1950s and 1960s, some fathers went to gaol because they refused to send their children to the newly consolidated public schools.

More recently, the Amish have found favour with many in mainstream culture. Perhaps the fact that few of them tell other people how to live out their faith helps explain their respected status. Because they believe that judging outside groups is God's prerogative, they are surprisingly tolerant of other Christians' expressions of faith. Most Amish would say that if they themselves get to heaven, they expect to find many believers from other denominations there also.

If in the future the Amish should again fall out of public favour and be regarded as unenlightened, unpatriotic, politically incorrect or worse, they will probably remain relatively unperturbed. They will continue to maintain a distance between themselves and the world, hold one another accountable, nurture their family and community life, and provide mutual support in times of need. If they face scorn or suffering, they will recall that their Anabaptist forefathers and mothers endured persecution and martyrdom for following their religious convictions. As Mennonite writer and documentary film-maker John Ruth says, 'The Amish know that they are out of step with society, and that is the way they want it.'¹⁹

Despite the paradoxes and inconsistencies in their lives and culture, they remain confident that they are pursuing the right path. A bishop from a very conservative affiliation explained: 'I believe that if a person is born Amish, he should stay Amish and be a faithful member.' In the midst of widespread concern over increased



alienation and societal dysfunction, most Amish continue to rear respectful, responsible children who eventually follow in the footsteps of their elders. Amish parents are not only a silent rebuke to their own children who may dabble for a while in worldly pleasures, but they are a silent witness against a culture that pursues pleasure, self-aggrandizement and personal success at the expense of community and transcendent values.

They believe that the core of their Christianity is obedience, humility, faithfulness and the quiet witness of a life well lived. When someone enquired about his Christian life, an Amish man replied, 'Ask my friends, family and the people I work with. They know how I live and should be able to answer that question.' A minister added, 'We think that possessing is much more important than professing.'²⁰ These sentiments underscore the Amish desire to let their lights shine 'in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation'.²¹

Notes

All biblical quotations are taken from the King James Version.

1. See David L. Weaver-Zercher (2001), *The Amish in the American Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), for an excellent and comprehensive account of how various media and interest groups have portrayed and packaged the Amish.
2. II Timothy 3:5.
3. Donald B. Kraybill and Marc A. Olshan (eds) (1994), *The Amish Struggle with Modernity* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England), pp. 53–74.
4. *Ausbund* (1984) (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster Press).
5. Thieleman J. van Braght (1998), *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale: Herald Press).
6. See Steven M. Nolt, *A History of the Amish* (1992) (Intercourse, PA: Good Books), for a thorough and engaging account of the Amish since the 1600s.
7. C. Nelson Hostetter (1997), *Anabaptist-Mennonites Nationwide USA* (Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press).
8. Matthew 5:39, James 5:12 and Matthew 5.
9. Titus 3:10, I Timothy 3:1-7 and I Corinthians 11:5.
10. Romans 12:2.
11. Donald B. Kraybill (1994), 'War against progress: coping with social change', in Donald B. Kraybill and Mark A. Olshan, (eds), *The Amish Struggle with Modernity* (Hanover: University Press of New England),



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- pp. 35–52.
12. Acts 1:26.
 13. Pathway of Aylmer, Ontario, Canada, publishes an English translation of *Die Ernesthafte Christenpflicht*.
 14. Ephesians 6:4.
 15. The translation of Pathway's *Die Ernesthafte Christenpflicht* (see n. 13 above) also contains a full English translation of the Dortrecht Confession.
 16. Sandra L. Cronk (1977), 'Gelassenheit: the rites of the redemptive process in Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonite communities', *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (55.1), pp. 5–44.
 17. Donald B. Kraybill (1989), *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press). Kraybill maintains that their insistence on intentional adult believers' baptism serves a strong sociological and psychological function in giving each youth a sense of choosing his or her destiny (pp. 139–40).
 18. Proverbs 22:6.
 19. Presentation given at Elderhostel class on 'Pennsylvania Dutch storytelling', Spruce Lake Camp, Canadensis, PA, June 1995.
 20. All interviews occurred between 1991 and 2000. Because of the Amish rejection of tape-recorders and camcorders, interviews were recorded by notes taken during or following the interviews.
 21. Philippians 2:15.



12. 'Until the power of the Lord comes down' African American Pentecostal spirituality and tarrying

David D. Daniels III

The history and presence of the Church of God in Christ

African American Pentecostalism combines the contemplative, ecstatic and ascetic to forge a vital, charismatic spirituality. The contemplative informs the manner that African American Pentecostals engage in spiritual activity, finding its origins in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practice of the ring-shout. The ecstatic defines the orientation of African American Pentecostals to a religious experience that is expressed bodily with uplifted hands, jubilant dance and exuberant praise. The ascetic shapes the spiritual disciplines of African American Pentecostals who value regular fasting, communal and personal prayer times, and various types of abstinence. The combination of the contemplative, ecstatic and ascetic within African American Pentecostalism has created a spirituality with echoes from the historic Christian tradition as well as the African religious heritage.

As a historically significant African American-led Pentecostal denomination, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) consists of different nationalities globally with congregations on six continents and six million members worldwide. Although the majority of the COGIC membership resides in the United States, COGIC is a major presence in various countries. COGIC celebrates 1897 as its founding as a holiness fellowship in the United States that embraced Pentecostalism in 1907 after its founder, Charles Harrison Mason,



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attended the Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, California. During the early years of the denomination, COGIC included a multiracial membership even though the leadership of the denomination was predominantly African American.¹

The first century of COGIC (1897–1997) can be divided into two periods: the Mason era and the post-Mason era. Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, a child of former slaves, served as the presiding bishop of the denomination from 1907 to 1961. His spiritual example defined the first era for more than fifty years and embodied COGIC spirituality. Mason was known as a ‘man of prayer’ who dedicated over three hours daily to prayer. Many of the spiritual practices developed with COGIC during the Mason era drew heavily upon the spirituality of the slaves and their descendants. COGIC attracted many of the working poor to its ranks for most of its first fifty years as a denomination and very early on established an urban presence within US black communities. The pacifist commitments of COGIC led it to apply for conscientious objector status on behalf of its draft-age male members during the First World War. Mason, along with other COGIC clergy, was arrested and tried by the judicial system because his pacifist rhetoric was often misinterpreted as anti-American. Although all the parties were found innocent, the denomination gained notoriety in some quarters, especially the pacifist and protest sectors. COGIC also attracted attention because of its dual-sex organizational structure. The denomination adopted a structure whereby congregations in an area constituted a district, a cluster of districts formed a jurisdiction, with each jurisdiction reporting to the national body. Each entity within the structure consisted of departments and offices that paired designated male and female officials.

Organizationally, COGIC also experimented with various inter-racial structures, ranging from an African American-led national structure with one black clergy fellowship and two white clergy fellowships, to interracial national, regional and local structures, to a white minority jurisdiction paralleling the overwhelming African American jurisdictions. The interracial experimentation during the first third of the twentieth century challenged the reigning racial pattern of segregation, distinguishing COGIC as one of the few US denominations to counter racial segregation in religious life. The racial politics of US Protestantism, however, encouraged the few ecumenically minded COGIC leaders to participate in African



American ecumenism or inter-denominational endeavours such as the Fraternal Council of Negro Churches. One of the consequences was that COGIC, like most black denominations, remained unaffected by the fundamentalist–modernist controversy that reconfigured white US Protestantism in its wake.²

During the post-Mason era of COGIC's first century (1961–1997), Bishop J. O. Patterson, Sen., who served as presiding bishop from 1968 to 1990, ushered in the changes that redefined COGIC during the late twentieth century, setting the denomination in the forefront of African American and Pentecostal ecclesiastic life. Bishop Patterson campaigned vigorously during his administration to reorganize and reconceptualize COGIC ministry, instituting new structural and symbolic changes that supported his vision of COGIC as a major African American and Pentecostal denomination in the United States. In the post-Mason era COGIC emerged as the second largest African American religious body and a contender as the largest US Pentecostal denomination. In 1970, COGIC established the first accredited US Pentecostal graduate seminary at the Inter-denominational Theological Center, a consortium of seven African American theological seminaries affiliated with Baptist, Presbyterian and various Methodist denominations. COGIC also became a founding member of the Congress of National Black Churches, an ecumenical body composed of the eight largest African American denominations. The symbolic and structural changes of the post-Mason era produced profound shifts in COGIC worship practices, theological orientation and especially spirituality.

The centrality and roots of tarrying

The core of African American Pentecostal spirituality is the practice of tarrying. Tarrying is a spiritual practice within African American Pentecostalism wherein a person praying at the altar repeatedly recites specific phrases. While the person prays, prayer leaders stand nearby to encourage the person in this spiritual exercise. Tarrying often follows the main evening worship service, especially on Fridays and Sundays, and can last from one to two hours. The tarrying service includes a format and content of its own, consisting of its special invocations, supplications, songs, rules and religious expectations.³



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Tarrying symbolizes the essence of black Pentecostal spirituality. Tarrying as a spiritual practice may soon be one of the special gifts that black Pentecostalism will offer to the global church because of its great depth as a practice and long history as a classic Christian form. Black Pentecostals in the United States have vigorously debated the validity and relevance of tarrying for the contemporary church. Tarrying received uninformed condemnation in many quarters during the late twentieth century, condemnation that might be justified in some instances because of distortions in practice and theological complications. Tarrying must be assessed biblically, theologically, devotionally and historically to understand its structure and determine its role in defining African American Pentecostal spirituality. What is uncontested is that the tarrying service was COGIC's key symbol or root metaphor, undergirding the COGIC experience of conversion, sanctification and baptism in the Holy Spirit during the first seventy-five years of the movement.

Tarrying finds its roots within the pre-twentieth century. The theological themes of tarrying were set in the nineteenth century in which, through tarrying, God offered the seeker salvation, deliverance, purging and cleansing. Through a dramatic experience with God, the seeker's life was often transformed in the context of a mourner's bench or ring-shout associated with a camp meeting or revival. Through these religious experiences shaped by tarrying's antecedents, the seeker crossed spiritual thresholds. These thresholds ranged from dreams and visions to overwhelming sensations to glossolalia. These religious experiences produced religious encounters that were profound and dramatic.⁴

Tarrying as a practice must be seen in the vortex of changes within American Protestant spirituality during the nineteenth century. Much of the change in American Protestant spirituality was a product of a cultural and social revolution in American society. As the 1800s progressed, American society adopted more of a bourgeois ethos as the ideal to emulate and internalize as well as the standard by which to judge all of life, including religion. The bourgeois cultural values stressed the suppression of emotions, regulation of spontaneity, standardization of practices and the primacy of human agency, resulting in a cultural revolution in manners and sensibilities. The bourgeois religious experience, then, prized self-revelation and self-reflection, rejecting the folk preoccupation with external revelation through dreams, visions and ecstatic experiences. Within this cultural



system, pre-bourgeois American spirituality was rejected as being too emotional, irrational, chaotic and unintelligible. Black Pentecostal spirituality identifies more with pre-bourgeois American Protestant spirituality that allowed space for emotionality, bodily movement in worship, testifying, etc. This strand of Protestant spirituality runs from the seventeenth-century English Quakers and New England Puritans to early nineteenth-century converts of Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Disciples revivalism.⁵

The historical origin of tarrying in the United States can be found in the black Christian practice of the ring-shout. The names ranged from Rocking Daniel and the Rope Dance to Ring. It was considered crucial for the invocation of the Holy Spirit in order for the conversion of sinners to occur: 'Sinners won't get converted unless there is a ring.' During a ring-shout, a ring is formed around a group of people who sing, the ring moving in a counter-clockwise direction. From the ring, shouts of encouragement are given to those encircled. This ring-shout is a spiritual exercise to prepare people for conversion or another encounter by God. The ring-shout could also be a prayer form resembling the rehearsal of God acts in an enacted prayer; these liturgical re-enactments of biblical events included a Jericho march, a re-enactment of 'Joshua's army marching around the walls of Jericho' or an Exodus march, the marching of Israel out of Egypt.⁶ The ring-shout countered the emerging bourgeois culture with its privileging of orderliness, quiet, solemnity and control, assaulting the emerging bourgeois sensibility by preferring a folk sensibility.

During the mid- to late nineteenth century, the denouncement of the ring-shout as heathenish and theologically unsound precipitated its declining use and eventual relocation to the religious underground. During this transition period, the structure of the ring-shout was transposed into tarrying. Advocates of tarrying found biblical warrant for its folk sensibilities in biblical texts that valued expressivity, jubilation, demonstrativeness, bodily engagement and emotionality by highlighting the psalmist tradition of dance, musical instruments and exuberant praise.

Tarrying as a prayer form is more than a practice merely reflecting its African heritage since it has powerful parallels throughout Christian history. Tarrying echoes the historic Christian practice of contemplative prayer. Like myriad forms of contemplative prayer, ranging from the Roman Catholic prayer of Hail Mary



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to the Orthodox practice of the Jesus Prayer, tarrying as a prayer form involves the recitation of a word or phrase repeatedly in a fashion that Christians have practised throughout the centuries. Key to tarrying are:

- (1) Active waiting on God
- (2) Patterned repetition of a Christian phrase or word
- (3) Concentration on the phrase or word
- (4) Communion or union with God.

Tarrying parallels contemplative prayer forms that seek communion with God rather than those that seek union with God. It agrees with the forms that stress verbalizing the prayer-word rather than silently meditating. Tarrying freely employs a short list of prayer-words as opposed to a limitless list and restricts the prayer to one word or phrase. While most contemplative prayer forms limit bodily involvement and movement, tarrying incorporates active, bodily participation. Finally, tarrying is not a private experience of an individual directing him- or herself; it is a communal event with the encouragement of altar workers and a prayerful congregation.⁷

African American Pentecostals employ the term 'tarrying' in connection with the Pentecost event in which according to the Lukan account in the book of Acts prayer in the Upper Room framed the experience. The Lukan account highlights the disciples and others praying and waiting. The King James version of the pericope translated the Greek word 'waiting' as 'tarrying'. African American Pentecostals lifted tarrying out of its mundane understanding of simply waiting, incorporated it as an element within spirituality, and conferred on it theological significance: prayer as waiting on God. Drawing upon the use of the word in the King James version, the word became joined with the form of prayer that was practised in the Upper Room. Of course, this was a simple switch since early African American Pentecostals interpreted scripture through a type of reader response interpretation wherein the reader of the biblical text interacted with the text from her or his perspective and context.

Tarrying became the underlying spiritual experience for nearly all COGIC members during the first seventy-five years of the denomination's history. All members in this period testified to having tarried at some time, whether to receive salvation or the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Through tarrying, God bestowed the dramatic religious experiences that often accompanied salvation.



The Evangelical Protestant emphasis on accepting Christ and the Confessional Protestant emphasis on baptism as means of grace were bracketed for the dramatic conversion. These dramatic religious experiences defined the COGIC message and practice.

Tarrying also served as a metaphor of the COGIC experience itself. In tarrying, God was acknowledged as sovereign, deciding who would save as well as when and where. COGIC believed God should be acknowledged as sovereign in all of life. God decides who should receive callings as ministers, missionaries, teachers and prayer leaders. God sends dreams, visions, prophecies, an inner witness and other forms of guidance to communicate God's will to congregations and individuals. In tarrying, people were instructed 'to let God have His [God's] way' in them. They were taught how to yield to the Holy Spirit, how to let God take charge. They were encouraged to transfer this disposition to other areas of their Christian life. Congregations were also expected to learn to yield to the Holy Spirit through special calls by the Holy Spirit to prayer vigils, consecrations and public confessions.

As a metaphor, tarrying expresses the yoking of divine and human agency with the primacy of the divine initiative being recognized. Tarrying as a metaphor is also informed by a spirituality modelled on denial, submission and scarcity rather than the contemporary Western preoccupation with fulfilment, mastery and abundance.

Tarrying served as a vehicle for the ecstatic. In the Mason era ecstatic worship was fostered by the praise format, which incorporated call and response or a responsorial element as well as the tarrying structure throughout worship. Especially during the praise moment, the worship leader would be led by the Holy Spirit in instructing the congregation in their responses, ranging from key tarrying phases such as 'Yes, Lord' to 'Thank you, Jesus' to 'Hallelujah' to 'Glory'. When God's presence was most evident, the congregation was informed that God was present and that they should reach out to God through praise and thanksgiving to encounter Him more fully. In ecstatic worship the moment was highly charged with spiritual intensity. The music was intense whether the songs were expressive, soul-wrenching chants or poly-rhythmic, fast-paced and upbeat. During the fast-paced songs, the congregation could sing a song or a medley at the same rhythm for an hour or more, intermingling the song with jubilant dance and exuberant praise. The singing and testifying would be merged with



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dialogical preaching, creating an ecstatic worship event. Periodically the ecstasy that erupted would lead to a spontaneous tarrying service.⁸

The elements of tarrying as spiritual disciplines

Tarrying consists of nine elements: prayer-word(s), repetition, fervency, interiorization, diligence, letting go, holding on, the breakthrough and the transformation. The elements of tarrying often overlap, blurring any sharp distinction between them. Movement occurs in tarrying from element to element, but the movement defies a simple interpretation. Movement between elements in tarrying occurs both horizontally and vertically, signally depth, height and expanse. Tarrying is a prayer form where one disciplines oneself through prayer. Tarrying requires a disciplining of the body, mind and spirit. In tarrying, the praying person matches words to emotions, in addition to meaning and commitment in the prayer task.

PRAYER-WORDS

Tarrying draws upon a collection of prayer-words: Jesus; Hallelujah; Thank you, Jesus; Thank you, Lord; Yes, Lord; Praise God; Thank you; Save me, Lord; Glory to God. These prayer-words aid the praying person in 'calling on the Lord'. Calling on the Lord is an address to God whereby the posture of praying people recalls the cry of blind Bartemaeus in Matthew. As in this passage, calling on the Lord is a continuous activity. Like Bartemaeus, the praying person repeats the prayer phrase until he or she contacts God. Calling on the Lord is also an invocation. It invokes God's presence, recalling God's goodness and grace. Tarrying presupposes that contact with God basically occurs when, with God's enablement, the praying persons present themselves wholly to God. In tarrying it is really God who waits, until the person by the grace of God responds with his or her whole being to God. Through tarrying, God makes people ready to be encountered by God. The stress falls on God making ready the praying person's whole being, not the person or God making the praying person worthy.



REPETITION

In tarrying, calling on the Lord involves the repetition of the prayer-words. The repetition aids the praying persons to focus their time, energy and being on God rather than being easily distracted. Psychologically, repetition of the prayer-words rests the analytical mind from trying to figure out what to say next, aiding the praying person in concentrating on God. By encouraging the praying persons to 'forget the folk around them, block out what happened earlier that day or what one needs to do later' and 'forget what folk might think', the altar workers help the praying persons to concentrate. The praying persons must bracket all distractions both internal and external. The objective is not to lose consciousness, but to increase attentiveness to God. The repetition is rhythmic. The rhythmic recitation of the prayer-words also fosters concentration by relieving the praying person from being preoccupied even with the prayer-words. The joining of hand-clapping to the rhythmic repetition sustains the pattern and structures the saying of the prayer-words.

FERVENCY

Fervency in prayer as commended in the James Epistle marks tarrying more than Paul's command to 'pray without ceasing'. Fervency as a concept shelters the jubilation, enthusiasm, spontaneity and expectancy which characterize tarrying, for to be fervent denotes vigour, energy and passion. Joining bodily engagement to the litany of the prayer-words links the body to the words or the physical to the verbal, thus aiding the embodiment of the prayer. The prayer is more than an intellectual exercise; it engages the whole being of the praying person.

The praying person is often encouraged 'to get ugly with God'. Getting ugly refers to embodiment. The praying person must be willing for a moment to go beyond detached praying and to engage the emotions in prayer. The praying person must be willing to square emotions with words; the prayer-words cannot be emotionless, disembodied. The prayer must be appropriately emotive. The praying person must be willing to plunge into the depths of his or her soul and speak to God. This union of body and words distinguishes the prayer-words from mantras used in various forms



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of meditation, for their meaning is unknown to the mediator and thus unmeaningful to the mediator, while prayer-words are quite meaningful to the praying person.

INTERIORIZATION

Praying persons not only repeat meaningful words; they are instructed to speak 'like they mean it'. The sincerity of the praying person is paramount. Both the act of tarrying and the repetition of the prayer-words must be done sincerely. While fervency in tarrying refers to embodiment, matching the prayer-words to emotions, sincerity in tarrying refers to interiorization, joining the prayer-words to the heart. Say it like you mean it directs the praying persons to speak from the heart.

Through interiorization, the praying person first digests the meaning of the prayer-words: taste, imbibe, munch on the prayer-words. Second, the praying person speaks the prayer-word more fully, for a fuller experience of the prayer-word evolves. The praying persons speak the prayer-word from further within themselves, saying the prayer-word that is packed with significance which both floods and overwhelms the hearts of the praying persons. Like breathing itself, the recitation involves both the inhaling and exhaling process; the heart resembles the lungs, inhaling meaningful words and exhaling the prayer-word in a more meaningful and initialled manner.

DILIGENCE

Diligence undergirds fervency, concentration and interiorization. The praying person must be diligent, determined, committed to contacting God. 'Make up your mind that you're going to stay here [in prayer] until you pray through' is the directive given to the people praying. They must commit themselves to this act of praying for whatever amount of time and energy is required. People occasionally express their determination in the form of vows in which they commit hours, mornings or evenings, or days to tarrying. Patience and diligence are crucial, for without them tarrying collapses into a form of spiritual manipulation.

Diligence in tarrying is analogous to Jacob's wrestling with the



angel in Genesis. Like Jacob, the praying person must be willing to stay all night until dawn, refusing to quit. Like the wrestler, the praying persons must be committed to expending a lot of energy, and honestly give all that is within them. With every fibre of their being, the praying persons are prepared by God to be encountered by God. Thus their whole being is consumed with passion for God and their whole being becomes permeated with the love, spirit and power of God. The praying persons now approach God with integrity, with a concerted act of their being, with a symphony of inner selves.

The discipline and commitment of the praying persons' whole being form the human component of tarrying. The disciplined body, mind and spirit offered to God in prayer describe a person who 'seeks God with all one's got' and 'wants God more than anything else'. Through praying persons' wholly disciplining themselves, they present themselves to God wholly and prepare themselves to be ushered wholly into God's presence. Radically open to God, the praying persons offer themselves wholly without much reserve, distraction or double-mindedness.

LETTING GO/HOLDING ON AND BREAKTHROUGH

At this point, the praying person receives a nudge from an altar worker to 'let go'. Letting go is an emancipatory event; it is to become free to God. Letting go relates to letting go of the known, the familiar, the experienced – ultimately even letting go of one's conception of God. One lets go of one's gripping hold on one's self: one's possibilities, one's self-image, one's self-worth, one's being. The praying person undergoes a purging experience during this moment, a purging of impurities. Psychologically, letting go refers to the act of relaxing one's defensive mechanisms: one's resistance, hesitation, denials, repressions, projections and interrogations.

In a sense, the praying persons switch grips: they let go of themselves and the known in order to 'hold on' to the in-breaking of God and the new. The transition may be unnerving, disorienting, even scary because of its unfamiliarity for some, while others experience it as refreshing and invigorating. To hold on is not a desperate grasp, but a free grasp; it is a free grasping of joy and exuberance. This is a critical transition, for without steadfastness the



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entrance to the fullness of prayer is blocked. The praying person through holding on pauses to be encountered by God. During this moment the intensity is the greatest because the praying persons expend the most of themselves. At the moment when the praying persons invest themselves the most and have reached the limit of human striving, the moment of greatest vulnerability, the 'breakthrough' often occurs, the breakthrough of God into the life of the person in prayer. For black Pentecostals, this is a moment of conversion or sanctification or baptism in the Holy Spirit. At the breakthrough, the praying person experiences an awakening, an awakening of one's spirit to commune with God.

Tarrying as the frame of COGIC spirituality

Tarrying, however, is more than a practice confined to the tarrying service. Tarrying, as mentioned above, symbolizes the essence of African American Pentecostal spirituality. The elements of tarrying are clustered with other spiritual practices to constitute the spirituality of African American Pentecostals. The prayer-words of tarrying within the spirituality of African American Pentecostals become transposed into exclamations that articulate praise: Hallelujah; Praise God; Thank you; Thank you, Jesus; Yes, Lord; Glory, and Glory to God. These exclamations that are so familiar within Pentecostal parlance are employed to communicate gratitude, devotion and praise to God.

COMMUNAL PRAYERS

Tarrying also shapes the five different kinds of communal types of prayers that are practised within black Pentecostal spirituality. When Christians pray aloud together collectively, blending all the individual prayers into a cacophony of prayer, this is 'prayer in concert'. Altar prayers may precede worship when Christians pray individually, albeit along with others who are individually praying, and these prayers may also follow the sermon when the minister offers a pastoral prayer. There's also an altar prayer, which invites people to repent, that follows a sermon; the penitents seek forgiveness. There are prayer lines where ministers offer intercessory



prayers on behalf of a person who stands before them, especially prayers of healing. In the pastoral prayer, the minister articulates specific prayer requests and general concerns as well as thanksgiving and praise. Finally, there is the prayer meeting, where the congregations often kneel in prayer for an hour or more. Periodically throughout the hour, a person will raise his or her voice above the soft-spoken prayers of the parishioners. During these moments, the parishioners will recite specific prayer-words that the prayer leader prompts them to repeat. During all these prayers, Christians are expected to craft their own prayers as well as participate in the communal prayer. In the communal prayers a call and response pattern frames the prayer in which the individual either repeats phrases stated in the corporate prayer or offers responses of 'Yes, Lord' to the petitions included in the corporate prayer. These exclamations include requests of 'Have your way, Lord' and cries of 'Heal, Lord', 'Save, Lord' and 'Deliver, Lord'. Characteristically they are fewer calls for God to have mercy, calls that define black Baptist prayers, for instance, and more calls for God to perform acts of deliverance.⁹

The fervency, interiorization and diligence that define tarrying mark these times of prayer. African American Pentecostal prayer affirms tarrying's recognition of the sovereign role of God. In a sense, prayer is an activity of God on behalf of humans. According to black Pentecostal spirituality, the Holy Spirit inspires the thoughts, provokes the recollections, overwhelms the praying person with God's presence, and fills the person with God's spirit during prayer. In prayer, people offer themselves to God in surrender and celebration. Being humble and vulnerable before God is essential to prayer. Without humility the praying person precludes him- or herself from being deeply encountered by God. Without vulnerability the praying person forecloses him- or herself from being deeply transformed by God. One is called to relate to God whole-heartedly. The repeated invitation as in tarrying is to pray 'like you mean it'.

All the key experiences of grace for African American Pentecostals are lodged in the context of prayer: conversion, sanctification and baptism in the Holy Spirit. Prayer profoundly relates to each of these experiences or stages of grace. While black Pentecostalism affirms God's initiative within all experiences of grace, prayer is understood as the channel to request these experiences. Christian existence becomes a life of prayer. All activity and passivity is to be entered into prayerfully.



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Periodically, Christians must withdraw from their daily routines to spend time in prayer. These moments may be prayer times lodged in the pre-dawn hours, early or mid-morning, at noon, afternoon or evening. While some pray for an hour twice a day, the expectation is to spend at least an hour once a day, reflecting Jesus' request at Gethsemane to pray for the minimum of an hour. In addition to praying for an hour or more daily, there are special times of consecration wherein Christians are encouraged to pray all night, ranging from a few times annually to once a month. This time also includes weekend prayer vigils, where people stay within the sanctuary and pray periodically over a thirty-six-hour period, often on a Friday evening to dawn on a Sunday morning.

FASTING

Fasting functions as a pivotal spiritual exercise within African American Pentecostal spirituality. African American Pentecostals practise various kinds of fast. While individuals may commit to a fast, fasting is regularly a commitment of a congregation. Fasts are held for different durations. African American Pentecostals practise total fast, which involves abstaining from all foods and beverages, including water, from eighteen hours to three days. There are fasts in which the person will drink only a small amount of liquid, ranging from soup and water, for a period of three to forty days. Fasting is interpreted as a disciplining of the body on the one hand and a means to prepare the person to be used more effectively by God on the other.

African American Pentecostal spirituality is also greatly informed by the asceticism of the nineteenth-century holiness movement. There is a strong tradition of abstaining from worldliness and carnality that African American Pentecostals define in terms of materialism, entertainment and alcoholic beverages. Central for African American Pentecostals is to enter all activity prayerfully, a posture that connects with the desire to live in the Spirit. Living in the Spirit as a desire means having the Holy Spirit undergird and direct the Christian's life. Thus the Christian must discern the voice and leading of the Spirit in order to heed its beckoning. This sensitivity to the Spirit is cultivated in prayer in accord with the prayerful reading of the scriptures.¹⁰



TESTIFYING

A pivotal personal act which parishioners of all ages are encouraged to do is testify. Many congregations hold testimony services during their regular Sunday, Tuesday and Friday evening services. Testifying requires the parishioners to narrate their personal lives in a liturgical form. In a testimony parishioners recount their spiritual journey; they telescope the history of their spiritual life within a narrative form. Within the testimony parishioners structure their spiritual journeys according to at least four moments. The first moment is often a recitation that acknowledges the person's relationship with God and recognizes the leadership within the congregation. Testimonies usually begin with sentences similar to the following:

First giving to honour to God
in the highest.
To the pastor, the elders, the
church mother, saints and friends.

Through this acknowledgement everyone present is honoured, especially the key offices of the congregation; and above all God. The second moment is where the parishioners highlight their spiritual status by professing their relationship with God and their significant or pivotal spiritual experiences.¹¹

I thank the Lord that I'm
saved, sanctified, and
baptized with the Holy Ghost.

The key religious experiences for black Pentecostal spirituality are accented during this moment of the testimony: conversion, sanctification and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Parishioners as young as 4 and 5 are seen as mature enough to recognize being graced by God with these religious experiences. During this moment in the testimony, parishioners offer thanks for their spiritual station as well as acknowledge their place among those who are Christian, especially Christians defined as Pentecostal.

The third moment is where Christians present what God has done for them. Many testimonies are framed to highlight how God has delivered the one testifying from dead-end situations, ranging from physical illness to unemployment to racism to mental distress. The plot structure of this moment in the testimony creates 'tension by offering



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specific instances of earthly hardship' which finds resolution through divine intervention. This moment is structured by a deliverance motif that is employed to demonstrate the realness and power of God. The central theme of this moment is 'God can supernaturally intervene' in the lives of people. Thus this moment in the testimony 'concretizes notions of divine guidance' and intervention.¹²

The testimonies reflect a world embodied by black Pentecostal spirituality that stresses God's and the devil's agency, while downplaying human agency. In this world, the supernatural overweighs the influence of the natural. Even when human agency is highlighted, the human agent is often a stranger who 'without any apparent motivation' intervenes or assists because God has prompted that person to do so. Human beings operate as more than pawns because, while the good and bad deeds committed by parishioners are attributed to God and the devil, respectively, good deeds demonstrate the parishioners' consent in obeying God's will as revealed in the scriptures: human agency encompasses consent. The testimony counters the narrative form of the Horatio Alger stories wherein the individual rises from poverty to prosperity through personal ability and ingenuity; God exercises primary agency in the world scripted by COGIC.¹³

The fourth moment concludes the testimony with a profession of dedication to God, couched within a prayer soliciting Christians to pray that the person 'be the one Lord is calling for in these last and evil days'. Again, it is clear that such a possibility could only occur by God's grace.

Black Pentecostal spirituality recognizes the 'need to become educated in God's ways', including the spiritual and natural; yet the spiritual is stressed more strongly. Such an education includes the biblical ways to worship God, live the holy, live a Christian life and be used by God. Included in this education is learning how to traverse the gulf between biblical times and the present so that God can use contemporary Christians as effectively as God used the faithful in the scriptures.¹⁴

To bridge the gulf, parishioners must become spiritually fit, which is an outgrowth of consistency in their worship participation, prayer, scripture reading, and the practice of Christian virtues. Integral to their consistency is faithfulness in prayer. A maxim of the congregation is 'much prayer – much power, little prayer – little power, no prayer – no power'.¹⁵



Conclusion

While other practices besides tarrying inform African American Pentecostal spirituality such as baptism, communion and foot-washing, historically tarrying has functioned as the seminal experience that has undergirded this particular form of spirituality. The seminal experience of tarrying changed during the last quarter of the twentieth century when tarrying was marginalized within the Church of God in Christ. In the post-Mason era a vigorous campaign was mounted to de-emphasize tarrying and to advance the evangelical 'acceptance of Jesus' approach'. The dislodging of tarrying from the core of the COGIC religious universe created a new moment within the COGIC spirituality; tarrying began to function metaphorically more than experientially. The ecstatic shifted from less trance-like expressions to more cathartic releases. The ascetic emphasis remained strong, especially through the tradition of prayer and fasting. Materialism even became less of an object of denial. The elements of tarrying framed COGIC spirituality in the post-Mason era, shaping the ethos and defining the orientation of the practices; yet tarrying as an actual religious experience became more a ritual of the past.

In this new moment various trends within American spirituality formed constituencies within COGIC. While the holiness focus always kept ordinary life issues prominent in the teachings about the Christian life, the solutions to life's dilemmas more often resorted to prayer and fasting as a primary means rather than appeals to psychology, sociology or politics. Currently, there are advocates of a spirituality that embraces ordinary means and borrows from disciplines such as psychology. There are also segments that seek to lodge the quest for social justice at the core of a COGIC spirituality. Often informed by black liberation theology, these proponents strive to merge the liberationist orientation of African American spirituality with COGIC's contemplative sensibilities. As African American Pentecostal spirituality enters the twenty-first century, it will more likely deepen its contemplative roots as well as intersect with exciting new Christian practices.



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Notes

1. Ithiel Clemmons (1996), *Bishop C. H. Mason and Roots of the Church of God in Christ* (Bakersfield, CA: Pneuma Life Publishing).
2. The gender parallels in the dual-sex structure include Pastor–Church Mother; District Superintendent–District Missionary; Jurisdictional Bishop–Jurisdictional Supervisor of Women; Presiding Bishop–General Supervisor of Women; YPWW President–YPWW Chairlady; Sunday School Superintendent–Sunday School Field Representative; and Evangelist Department President–Evangelist Department Elect Lady; on the dual-sex system see Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (1985), ‘Together and in harness: women’s traditions in the sanctified church’, *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture and Society* (5), pp. 678–99; for pacifism see Theodore Kornweibel, Jr. (1987), ‘Bishop C. H. Mason and the Church of God in Christ during World War I: the perils of conscientious objection’, *Southern Studies* (xxvi, 4, winter), pp. 261–81.
3. Cheryl J. Sanders (1996), *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 58.
4. Donald W. Dayton (1987), *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Francis Asbury Press).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Lawrence W. Levine (1977), *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 32.
7. Donald L. Alexander (ed.) (1988), *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), pp. 171–89.
8. Sanders, *Saints in Exile*, pp. 49–70.
9. E. J. Dabney (1988), *What It Means to Pray Through* (Memphis, TN: COGIC Publishing Board).
10. Fay Ellis Butler (n.d.), *Called to Be Saints* (Brooklyn, private publication).
11. Arthur E. Paris (1982), *Black Pentecostalism: Southern Religion in an Urban World* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press), pp. 58–61.
12. Ray Allen (1991), *Singing in the Spirit: African-American Sacred Quartets in New York City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), p. 117; Mary M. Fulkerson (1994), *Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press), pp. 264, 257.
13. Peter D. Goldsmith (1989), *When I Rise Cryin’ Holy: African-American Denominationalism on the Georgia Coast* (New York: AMS Press), p. 111.



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14. Joseph M. Murphy (1994), *Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* (Boston, Beacon Press), p. 173.
15. Butler, *Called to Be Saints*, p. 94.



13. Taizé

A global and post-colonial theology of community¹

Liam Gearon

‘Before all else, faith is humble trust in God.’
(Brother Roger of Taizé, *Meditations in Milan*)²

Introduction

I first visited Taizé with a group of friends in the late summer of 1980. It was the middle of the night when we arrived in France from London, and I remember that first night we slept in the open in a forest until the rain of the early hours woke us. Tired, we drove further south towards the French-Swiss border and Taizé. We stayed in Taizé for a week. During those increasingly warm August days there were perhaps three thousand others gathered in the Burgundy countryside, from all parts of Europe and beyond. What do I remember most from that visit? The light of candles flickering on Eastern Orthodox icons in a pewless church; the distinctive liturgical chants in Latin and a host of international languages. The days seemed full of optimism, and it is that hope for the future which might be said to characterize Taizé itself.

On the way back to Calais our mini-bus broke down in a French village, and we were offered a large, unoccupied and only semi-derelict house in which to stay by another generous community. We stayed in this house for three or four days until an essential mechanical part arrived for the bus. Strangely, it was almost as if – naive or not – the essence of Taizé as community was evident even long distant from the village itself further south in France.



Back then, the Taizé community was almost exactly forty years old. Twenty years later in January 2000 I was privileged to return to Taizé, speaking to visitors and interviewing members of the community. It is out of both these visits – and some years of intervening reflection – that this chapter arises, with gratitude to the community that still welcomes the young (and not quite so young any longer) sixty years after its foundation.

Taizé: the origins and history of an ecumenical community³

The international, ecumenical community in Taizé, France, was founded in 1940 by Brother Roger. It is a unique and distinctive worldwide focus for a model of contemporary spirituality committed to reconciliation not only between differing Christian denominations but all peoples. The community in France now consists of members from over twenty-five countries and every continent, while outreach work extends similarly throughout the world. Rooted in its founding principles of compassion and an active commitment to social justice, Taizé spirituality is also grounded in a meditative life of prayer in community.

Arguably, though, as one brother commented, ‘There is no Taizé spirituality, as there is no Taizé theology.’ What he meant was that Taizé’s spirituality and theology are rooted firmly and in a deeply orthodox way in the traditions of the Christian Church. What is distinctive is Taizé’s simple synthesis of elements from the varying Christian traditions and denominations. Thus Taizé’s strongly contemplative liturgy is renowned as a creative mix of literature, music and visual artistic expression from the Christian East and West. The famous icons are versions of Eastern Orthodox religious painting; the chants often have hints of Gregorian and Latin, reflecting a pre-Reformation tradition of Catholic monastic musicology; the carefully chosen Bible-readings emphasize a Protestant stress on scriptural reading which, post-Vatican II, increasingly came to be marked within Catholic tradition.

All traditions are linked through prayer, especially the three times daily prayer as community, and unified too by the deeply meditative silence which is at the heart of all such communal gatherings. In the Church of Reconciliation, capable of holding many thousands with the peak of visitors in the summer months, it is perhaps the silence



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which hits home most directly of all. In the context of thirty or forty minutes of chanting and Bible-reading, it is a silence that may last for up to a quarter of an hour. It is deep silence. The Church of Reconciliation has small, highly elevated windows, icon-cut windows: sapphires, ultramarines, ruby reds. The icons depict pivotal texts from the Christian New Testament: the Transfiguration of Christ, the *via Dolorosa* of Christ as pastoral lamb, the joy of the Risen Christ. Any time of day or night, light barely penetrates the glass icon windows set high in the walls; but the Church of Reconciliation is far from dimly lit. Where an altar might stand, lights from hundreds of candles burn brightly, flickering before and around two of Taizé's most abiding images: the icon of a black Madonna and child, and the famous white, red and yellow outlines of a cross-shaped icon bearing the figure of a dark-skinned Christ, seemingly already partaking of the life of Resurrection. When inside the tightly sealed doors, it is difficult to differentiate fully day from night. This seems to make the all-encompassing silence all the more deep and complete; a silence that, on first encounter, is unexpected. The church is never closed and will rarely be fully empty of people. Indeed, visitors will be ever-present within this beautiful, and beautifully simple, church; but it is a beauty not arising from any especially apparent architectural refinements. Its beauty – and as always this is perceived by the individual viewer – seems to arise from decades of private meditation, communal contemplation, a purposeful silence reaching across the last decades of the twentieth century into the next, and a subtle reminder of some of the most neglected contemporary elements of Christian tradition itself.

Taizé, the village itself, more a hamlet really, does not always appear on maps of France. It did not feature on the detailed map of France which I bought in Heathrow airport before flying to Geneva. The Church of Reconciliation is modelled on the tiny chapel in the village of Taizé itself. The sign on the outside of the latter reads 'Place of Silence'. Inside, again, there is little light. But the icons – as familiar to Taizé as to the Eastern Orthodox tradition from which they derive their inspiration – are there. So are the simple candles. The outside world is shut out. It is this chapel which Brother Roger first discovered when, having left neutral Switzerland, he was directed to a house for sale in Taizé in the early stages of the Second World War in 1940. He had seen the advertisement in the nearby French village of Cluny, a place world famous for its monastic



tradition. The village chapel of Taizé appealed to the young Protestant man for its simplicity – and for the silence, which shut out the world of violence existing beyond its walls.

Situated close to the dangerous border between Free and Occupied France, the Taizé chapel was first used by Brother Roger when he moved to the village in 1940. The walls of the church may have shut out the war, providing a physical space for experiencing the transcendent, but for the young Swiss – as for the unassuming international figure known to millions simply as Brother Roger – contemplation was not seen as a means of spiritual escape. Helping many refugees – Jews, Partisans, the Resistance – across the border or sheltering them in his own simple home, Roger saw suffering as the heart of true contemplation; and that only contemplation could sustain in the heart of true and horrific suffering.

As Taizé was founded in a world torn apart by war and conflict, it also found its appeal in the aftermath of a world which was suddenly post-colonial – seeing the end of many imperial empires – and a world become increasingly globalized.⁴ As the small community grew, it became defined through its simple monasticism by a Rule in 1949 that attracted at first Protestant but then increasingly Catholic brethren too. As the decades progressed, the community became established as a model of reconciliation not simply between Christian traditions but divided humanity itself, its attraction extended to a world increasingly freed from old colonial ties, even if entrenched in newer, more subtle economic involvements with the same, former colonial powers. The brothers are representative of all five continents – rich and poor countries – but the differences, while not neglected, are subsumed in prayer and the life of the community. The Taizé community can thus be examined in the context of a distinctive but traditional Christian spirituality, one articulated by a globalized theology politically contextualized by the historical moments of post-coloniality. The local community at and global community of Taizé – the Brothers and temporary visitors in France and the outreach workers throughout the world – reflect not simply a model of a transformed planet but a model for managing such life through human community. In a model of harmonious living among nations, traditions and cultures, Taizé reflects the conflicts, the imbalances and resentments of history and contemporary life, but also effects a transformation of such into reconciliation. It is not an easy path.

Nevertheless, as such, Taizé's international appeal across



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national, ideological and theological borders provides a model for living in community – locally, nationally and internationally. In addition, Taizé possesses some strong political and theological allies across all such borders.⁵ The Taizé community is living both to its rootedness within tradition – the Brother's reminder that there is no Taizé spirituality, no Taizé theology – and to its challenging reminder to the world of the roots of tradition itself. It is a Christian tradition of action and contemplation but, as others have noted, there is no compulsion or enforced Christian context:⁶ the appeals against injustice and discord are as quiet and subtle as the silence of its prayer. The appeals are modest: a Brother reminds me that there is no Taizé movement, that Taizé is simply a small community. The appeals, nevertheless, to contemplative silence and engaged presence in the world are universal.

The story of Taizé, then, is one which reflects the story of perhaps both the most bloody and yet arguably the most 'progressive' of human centuries. The story of the Taizé community, perhaps appropriately therefore, has an origin that pre-dates its actual formation in 1940 by Brother Roger. The latter often cites a seminal influence as that of his grandmother during the First World War. While her three sons were fighting on the battle lines of conflict in Europe, she despaired of the thought of Christians slaughtering Christians in the trenches. In her struggle for religious and social reconciliation, she offered her home to refugees from the war and, without considering this to be a betrayal of her own Protestant tradition, entered the Catholic Church.

These two symbols of reconciliation – the social and the religious – are said to have marked Brother Roger for life. The influence of this early formative experience was evident in 1940 when Europe and the world were being fragmented by further conflict. Leaving Switzerland, where he was born, he went to the conflict in France. As is often cited, Brother Roger claimed, 'The more a believer wishes to live the absolute call of God, the more essential it is to do so in the heart of human distress.'⁷ From that prophetic visit to nearby Cluny, his purchase of a house in the village of Taizé has had unexpected results. A 25-year old man living alone, he used the house as a place of prayer in the midst of violence. Like his grandmother in the First World War, he provided, at great personal risk, help to victims of persecution. Here is the essence of the Taizé message, which was later to suffuse the Rule of Taizé, a commitment both to inner



contemplation and to human solidarity. This is the message that repeats the essential summary of tradition, a harmony like the refrain of the Taizé repeated day after day for over half a century in the Church of Reconciliation.

While Brother Roger was abroad assisting someone without the necessary papers to escape to neutral Switzerland, the Nazis occupied the whole of France: this forced him to remain in his native country from 1942 to 1944. When he returned, he returned with others. Predominantly Protestant in denominational affiliation at first, those from the Catholic tradition gradually joined the steadily growing community. Yet, in the immediate aftermath of the war, they saw the dejection of German prisoners of war and the community offered a weekly meal to these prisoners as they had helped *victims* of the same regime only years earlier. With community growth there was, like the first Christian monastic communities, the felt need for a specific rule by which to guide life together. The 1952 Rule of Taizé reflected the vows which the Brothers had voluntarily entered into in the previous years: celibacy, a life of poverty, and the communal sharing of material and spiritual goods.⁸

These historical origins and this development of Taizé as a community still form a paradigm of its continuing mission today. The world in which Taizé arose was thus one disrupted violently by war and subsequent, and manifold, struggles for national independence and identity. In the aftermath of the Second World War, it was a world that was to see empires fall and the governance of historical imperialisms decline. Universal declarations such as that of the United Nation's Declaration on Human Rights, still a cornerstone of idealism (even if still contested) across ideological borders, sought to impose a global standard of moral action in this new era. The world was also suddenly to become dominated by new technologies – undreamt of by small communities such as that formed by Brother Roger in 1940 – which would consolidate the moral inclusiveness of the post-war era. Yet this world – increasingly globalized and self-consciously post-colonial – would remain far from the ideals of its universal declarations and, despite the stated independence of new and developing nations, old imperialisms had the habit of being seemingly transferred to more subtle forms of economic and political domination. Yet precisely within the historical context of this self-consciously global post-colonial planet, the community of Taizé – retaining its original goals of life of service in contemplative



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community – grew exponentially and out of all physical recognition from its tiny beginnings over six decades ago. In such a world, Taizé attracted people from across all national and continental borders, and with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the erosion of the Iron Curtain, this included a unification of a divided East and West. Indeed, visitors from Eastern Europe and Russia have increased in a particularly notable way.⁹

In addition, the revised Rule, often referred to as the *Sources of Taizé*, took on a more explicitly, and clearly scripturally, derived theology to account for such historical transformations. In 1990 (the date is not insignificant after the dramatic events of 1989), *Sources of Taizé* thus became known in rewritten form as *No Greater Love: Sources of Taizé*.¹⁰ The latter reference to John's Gospel – that no greater love can a person have that they give up life for another – reflects a self-conscious awareness of Taizé's place in the modern world. As always, though, the essence of what Taizé is about conforms, if radically, to Christian tradition itself. Again, at Taizé the message can always be simply expressed. It is a commitment to a life of personal and collective prayer and a commitment to social consciousness, conscience and action. Again, it is a message that might be summarized as Taizé's integral vision of contemplation and human solidarity.

Contemplation and human solidarity: Taizé as a parable of communion¹¹

Brother Roger has an understanding of what Taizé is not. It is not simply a group 'united to be stronger, humanly speaking, in order to realize their own aims' nor a means of achieving a common life of comfort apart from the world. Allowing that Taizé should be a place of happiness for the many from around the world who share its life in community, it should be a happiness rooted 'in the context of the offering of our lives'. Indeed Brother Roger, again with due modesty, describes Taizé simply as a 'little community'. Yet within the founding vision of its community is the key notion that Taizé is 'a parable of communion'.¹²

In Christian theological terms, this is 'a simple reflection of that unique communion which is the body of Christ'. More widely, though, 'parable of communion' serves as part of 'a ferment in the



human family'. Fundamentally, at the heart of Taizé is a mission to reflect the message integral to the grand narrative of Christianity itself, the call to love:

In our common life, we can only move forward by discovering anew the miracle of love, in daily forgiveness, heartfelt trust, and peace-filled contemplation of those entrusted to us. When we move away from the miracle of love, all is lost, everything comes apart.¹³

It is this universalism, demonstrated within the particularities of community, which enables Taizé to provide both a model of Christian tradition and a means of reaching out into ecumenical and interfaith communion. It is a global theology of community that enables Christian tradition to fulfil its evangelical mission in the world.

Yet, in acting as a light to all peoples, Taizé retains both its own Christian integrity and a commitment to those for whom such integrity is denied. Indeed, it is a founding principle of the community that God is found most often in the heart of human distress, among those for whom, in the face of the harsh demands of basic survival, the notion of spirituality might be regarded as a luxury. Many members of Taizé, and those committed to its founding principles, choose to live *outside* of the French community itself. In fact, within the first decade of Taizé's foundation, the Brothers chose to live among the poor of many continents, not only in Europe but in North and South America, Asia and Africa.

The message of Brother Roger and the Taizé community can thus be summed up through a commitment to the Christian teaching about love of God and one's neighbour. The spiritually contemplative is mixed with the spiritually and politically active, one mode of spirituality feeding and enriching the other. As members of the community reach actively into the world through charitable giving of their own lives, they do so also in the contemplative prayer for the world in community.¹⁴

Like the Christian message itself, Brother Roger's message is one that is consciously universal and consciously global. Brother Roger's millennium address, for instance, was one genuinely addressed to the world, *Letter from Taizé: 1999–2001* being translated into fifty-eight different languages (including twenty-three Asian and seven African ones). This *Letter from Taizé* re-summarizes the basic teaching of love as being the heart of Christian spirituality – as contemplation of God and love of neighbour through active participation in the world.



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It is a simple, and simply expressed, message which has always been at the heart of the Taizé community and an inspiration for those moved by its particular form and statement of Christian living.

The *Letter from Taizé* therefore asks: 'Are realities which make life beautiful, and of which can be said that they bring a kind of fulfilment, an inner joy?' The rhetorical response is a simple 'Yes': 'And one of those realities bears the name of trust.' So simple that 'Even a child can do it'. This trust is seen as a fundamental existential need: 'In a child's heart, the knowledge that he or she is deeply loved, and also forgiven, can be a source of peace for an entire lifetime.' Yet there is an existential realism also in the message that is rooted in knowledge of the adversity that the world itself provides: 'But every age has its troubles – being abandoned by others, seeing those we love die. And for many people today the future is so uncertain that they lose courage.' The equally deep-rooted quest for the removal of anxiety about the human condition – which has in the twentieth as in other centuries manifested in its own peaks of critical self-consciousness – is simply expressed in the *Letter*: 'How can we leave worry behind?' Roger's theological answer is equally simple: 'The source of a confident trust is in God who is love. God's love is forgiveness; it is inner light.'¹⁵

Yet, while not overtly political, the message of Taizé, especially its living parable of community, is inevitably a challenge to the leaders of the world's powerful political and economic lobbies. It is a message that underpins Taizé's commitment to meditative reflection. So:

Trust does not cause us to forget the suffering of so many unfortunate people across the earth, those who have no work or nothing to eat.

These trials make us reflect: how can we be people who, sustained by a life of communion in God, take on responsibilities and search with others for ways of making the earth a better place to live in?

A trust that comes from the depths does not lead us to flee responsibilities, but rather to remain present in places where human societies are in turmoil or out of joint. It enables us to take risks, to keep going forward even in the face of failures.

And we are amazed to find that this trust makes us able to love with a selfless love, one that is not all possessive.¹⁶

It is a message that is rooted too in the practical language of political organization and international economics, the scandal of the



inequitable and iniquitous underpinning an awareness whose contemplation and compassion never allows recourse to anger despite the statistics:

According to the United Nations, worldwide military expenditures amount to 800–900 billion dollars per year. It would cost only 130 billion dollars to provide a roof, clean water and basic sanitary facilities for the one billion 300 million persons who live in utter poverty.¹⁷

It is a message that translates into practical expressions of human solidarity. Recently, for example, sponsored by the 1998 Young Adult European Meeting in Vienna, the transatlantic ‘Operation Hope’ sponsored a shipment of grain to North Korea. Another shipment followed in the winter of 1999.

Taizé’s is a vision which thus combines both a practical concern for everyday Christian living with a focus on the meditative reflection so often forgotten in a world which so easily prioritizes political and economic activity, a world which forgets the quiet moment of remembering our ultimate, and ultimately fragile, human condition. Yet it is a contemplation that refuses to forget the world entirely. Taizé’s Rule asks not that we forget the historical moment – which it makes plain is the only place for human action – but, in highlighting the temporal limitations of the historical moment, presents a vision of eternity within history itself. It is in the moments of our human history which are provided with true power through contemplation in action, and action in contemplation, the temporal hand-in-hand with the transcendent:

Whoever walks in Christ’s footsteps remains at one and the same time close to God and close to others. Prayer is a serene force at work within human beings, unsettling them, not letting them fall asleep in the face of evil, of the hardships that so many people are undergoing. Indispensable energies of compassion are drawn from prayer.¹⁸

There are many means whereby Taizé’s spirituality calls the world to such a continual remembrance. This is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in the day-to-day life of the community itself, and the programme it offers its visitors. There are a number of options: ‘Sources of Faith’ Bible Study Group – there is a strong emphasis on direct, experiential reading of scripture at Taizé; the ‘Working Group’ – making paths, watering trees and flowers, cleaning dormitories and toilets, running the non-profit café Oyak; ‘A Week in Silence’ – for those wishing to deepen their experience of personal



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reflection for an extended period. In the autumn and at quieter periods during the year the Working Group may be the only group available.

A typical day at Taizé has remained unchanged since my last visit twenty years ago:

- 8.15 a.m. Morning prayer, followed by breakfast
- 10.00 a.m. Introduction to the day
- 11.00 a.m. International groups
- 12.20 a.m. Midday prayer, followed by lunch
- 2.00 p.m. Optional song practice
- 3.30 p.m. Practical work/small group discussion
- 5.00 p.m. Snack
- 5.30 p.m. Meetings by country or by theme
- 7.00 p.m. Supper
- 8.30 p.m. Evening prayer followed by prayer vigil in the church, or free time

In the Burgundy midwinter of my most recent visit, there were barely thirty visitors rather than the many thousands who would mark the coming summer's peak. Still, the range of ages, backgrounds and nationalities was extraordinary. I arrived on the bus from Mâcon with a Magdalen College classics graduate from Oxford, currently a marketing executive in his early twenties contemplating priesthood in the Church of England. I met a woman from New Zealand studying alternative medicine and currently travelling around Europe. There was a small group of men and women in their early twenties fresh from the millennium meeting in Warsaw, Poland. There was a group of men and women in their late forties/early fifties of professional background from Belgium and Holland. Another group of three men and three women, in their mid-twenties, were from France. In the evening, local villagers joined and expanded the number of the community.

The pattern of communal prayer is always the same. Visitors gather in the Church of Reconciliation. They sit in silence on the steps or in the main body of the pewless church. Some sit on the occasional bench around the edges of the building. Some read the Bible or bible-reading for the day. Some unselfconsciously prostrate themselves. Edged by greenery, a small and almost incongruous two-foot-high hedgerow provides a movable aisle which, in two parallel lines, stretches the length of the church, and separates visitors from



community. The Brothers, dressed in white, enter individually, some in small groups. It may take ten or even fifteen minutes for all the community to arrive. There is, as always at Taizé, the absolute minimum of ceremony. Brother Roger, now in his eighties, a little frail, enters, one of the last of the community to do so. The Brothers sit upright on the prayer stools that are also characteristic of the community prayer life. An incantation begins the service, a reading continues in four or five languages; there are hymns; and then the silence.

In a world where personal and corporate gain is so often the mark of financial corruption, the Taizé community retains too a model of financial probity which might seem foolish to the multinationals but which keeps it at one with the Spirit of the Gospel, especially where that message urges solidarity with the poor, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed and the disempowered. Here the Community Rule unifies the day-to-day life of simple subsistence in Burgundy with a universal human solidarity:

The Taizé Community does not accept gifts for itself; it lives entirely by its own work. By its work, the Community also takes on a part of the costs of the welcome: so many young people cannot contribute to the cost of their stay, or sometimes because they come from far away, whether in Europe or in other continents, sometimes because of unemployment. Moreover, for many years the Community has felt the need to give support to the most marginalized people across the world, as at the moment in Sudan, South Africa, Tanzania, Bangladesh, Brazil, Central America, Russia.¹⁹

The message of integrity contains within it a covert appeal to those with economic and political power in the world today: 'We would prefer not to have to write this appeal for solidarity, but we would like these situations to be understood.'²⁰

Taizé: a global and post-colonial theology of community

Pope John XXIII, the great reforming pope of the twentieth century who instigated the Second Vatican Council, once exclaimed: 'Ah, Taizé, that little springtime!' Three decades later Pope John Paul II visited Taizé. After praying on the hillside, John Paul II met in a small, intimate meeting with the Brothers and reiterated that sense of papal warmth towards the community in a restatement of Pope



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John's words. In his short address, John Paul II expressed his hope that the community would continue to remain small while acting as a larger leaven of hope within the Church as a whole, as well as the wider world. In a time just prior to the dissolution of another great empire (1985 – four years before the fall of the Berlin wall), the Pope spoke of the community's life as 'an expression of simple faithfulness to the Gospel lived in the joy of the Beatitudes'. It is significant that these famous lines from the Sermon on the Mount refer to the power of the poor and the disempowered, and the spiritual strength of the politically weak in the face of oppression and persecution: Taizé has, since its foundation, always appealed to those without power in society, especially the young.²¹

It is in this sense that its theology of community might be deemed both global and post-colonial: in seeking universal human solidarity the message of Taizé disavows the power structures of traditional imperialism – ideological *and* theological – which so damage the human spirit individually and socially. It disavows too those new forms of more subtle – especially economic – imperialism which perpetuate division and discord through inequalities of basic human opportunity, whether of spiritual nurture or material sustenance. John Paul II was not unaware of the innate appeal of such a theological and political juxtaposition when he commented that 'although you did not look for it, you have seen young people everywhere come to you by the thousands, attracted by your prayer and your community life'.²²

It is a vision of the importance of the young in any (local, national or global) society on which the Taizé community increasingly focused as the community developed an international as well as an interdenominational appeal. The young were again highlighted in Brother Roger's *Letter from Taizé 1999–2001* as integral to Taizé's mission of a global pilgrimage of trust which extends beyond all boundaries of theological and ideological difference: 'Today, many young people across the earth are trying to heal divisions in the human family. Their confident trust can make life beautiful around them. Are they aware that, without their realizing it, a hope shines out in them?'²³ In this pilgrimage of trust on Earth, 'Taizé tries to find gestures and symbols that evoke, beyond present difficulties, a longing for a springtime of the Church, a Church that is a place of sharing and a leaven of reconciliation at the heart of humanity'.²⁴

In his reflections from the twenty-first Young Adult European



Meeting, held in Milan between 28 December 1998 and 1 January 1999, Brother Roger reflected how such a pilgrimage of trust demonstrates a simple Christian faith, a faith so simple as to have universal and interreligious appeal:

*Clearly, trust in God cannot be communicated to others by argument. Arguing with others, attempting to impose faith upon them at whatever cost can provoke worry and even fear. And what, after all, is faith? Faith in God is a simple trust. And faith becomes comprehensible by its very simplicity. Before all else, faith is a humble trust in God.*²⁵

During the following Easter of 1999, Cardinal Glemp of Poland and Brother Roger jointly announced that the twenty-second Young Adult European Meeting would be held in Warsaw, the third such meeting to be held in Poland – the last time at the time of the fall of the Berlin wall and again five years later. The meeting in Milan attracted more than 100,000 late-twentieth-century pilgrims. Many tens of thousands were attracted as well to the ongoing pilgrimage of trust on Earth in Warsaw between 28 December 1999 and 1 January 2000.²⁶

The message of Taizé remains one of urging contemplation and human solidarity. Taizé is a humble beacon for reconciliation among Christians and all people in a complex world order. A practical, lived search for justice and peace, the call is one to a simple trust in God. At Taizé, private and communal prayer is the means of finding such trust, a means of experiencing God, and reaching out to others in love – whatever faith, whatever ideology. The contemplative space which Taizé provides – palpable in the Church of Reconciliation – is summarized in the words of Isaiah (45:6): ‘Apart from me, all is nothing’ – beyond God, there is nothing. Here resonate the words of Brother Roger: that ‘to remain in God’s presence is like breathing deeply after we had lacked sufficient air’.²⁷

Notes

1. Thanks are offered to the Faculty of Education, University of Surrey Roehampton, for funding a research visit to Taizé in January 2000, which enabled the completion of this chapter. Thanks are offered to the community of Taizé and their usual hospitality to pilgrims, especially the Brothers whom I interviewed and who wished comments made to remain anonymous.



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2. Brother Roger (1999), *Meditations in Milan* (Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé).
3. The standard historical reference work is J. L. G. Balado (1990), *The Story of Taizé* (London: Mowbray).
4. Some key texts in the analysis of globalization are: R. Robertson (1992), *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage); A. Giddens (ed.) (1992), *Global Politics: Globalization and the Nation-State* (Cambridge: Polity Press); M. Albrow (1994), *Globalization: Myths and Realities* (London: Roehampton Institute); P. Beyer (1994), *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage); B. S. Turner (1994), *Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism* (London and New York: Routledge); M. Featherstone (1995), *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (London: Sage); M. Walter (1995), *Globalization* (London: Routledge); A. Appadurai (1996), *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press); T. Spybey (1996), *Globalization and World Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press); A. M. M. Hoogvelt (1997), *Globalisation and the Postcolonial World: The New Political Economy of Development* (London: Macmillan); H. Kung (1997), *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (London: SCM); C. Barker (1999), *Television, Globalization and Cultural Identities* (Buckingham: Open University Press). The key text in post-colonial theory is the seminal E. Said (1979), *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), and (1994), *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage). For an extremely accessible introduction to the field (probably the best), see L. Gandhi (1998), *Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press). For a range of primary critical sources see B. Moore-Gilbert, G. Stanton and W. Maley (eds) (1997), *Postcolonial Criticism* (London: Longman). For a range of primary, historical texts, see the highly useful B. Harlow and M. Carter (eds) (1999), *Imperialism and Orientalism: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Oxford: Blackwell). On the continuing importance of religion in a global and post-colonial world, see the ground-breaking work of J. Casanova (1994), *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), and J. Haynes (1998), *Religion in Global Politics* (London: Longman).
5. See Brother Roger (2000), *Letter from Taizé* (Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé). Here 'Messages received at Taizé' include formal greetings from Pope John Paul II, the General Secretary of the United Nations Mr Kofi Annan, Patriarch Alexis II of Moscow and the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey.
6. See S. Laplane (1996), 'Servant of Trust', *Ecumenism* (124, December) pp. 6-9.



7. See 'The Community' and 'The Story' on the Taizé internet site, <http://www.taize.fr/>
8. Balado, *The Story of Taizé*, pp. 23–32.
9. See, for instance, O. Yerokhina (1999), *A Hope Shared: Young Russians at Taizé* (Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé).
10. Brother Roger (1991), *No Greater Love: Sources of Taizé* (London: Geoffrey Chapman).
11. In addition to *Sources of Love*, the teachings of Brother Roger can be found in a range of his own writings. An accessible volume is Brother Roger (1990), *His Love Is a Fire: Central Writings with Extracts from Journals* (Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé). See also Mother Teresa and Brother Roger (1986), *Meditations on the Way of the Cross* (London: Mowbray). A summary of the essence of the message emanating from Taizé is the Taizé Community (1999), *Taizé: Trust on Earth* (Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé).
12. Balado, *The Story of Taizé*, pp. 27–32.
13. Brother Roger (1999), *Letter from Taizé, 1999–2001* (Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé).
14. See the Taizé Community, *Taizé: Trust on Earth*.
15. Brother Roger (1999), *Letter from Taizé, 1999–2001*.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. The Taizé Community (1999), *Pilgrimage of Hope: Human Solidarity* (Taizé: Les Presses de Taizé).
20. *Ibid.*
21. See Brother Emile (1996), 'Our pilgrimage with young people', *Ecumenism* (124, November), pp. 10–15, and (1996), 'Helping young people take on responsibility', *Ecumenism* 'That Little Springtime', 5 October 1986 (124, November), pp. 19–23.
22. John Paul II (1999), (Taizé: Ateliers et Presses de Taizé).
23. Brother Roger, *Letter from Taizé, 1999–2001*.
24. The Taizé Community, *Pilgrimage of Hope: Human Solidarity*.
25. Brother Roger (1999), *Meditations in Milan*.
26. Brother Roger, *Letter from Taizé*.
27. Brother Roger, *Meditations in Milan*.



14. The diaspora of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries

Clive Erricker

What are we? All our communities are called Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeri. But first is Khoja. We are Khojas because that is our tribe, Shi'as because that is what our belief is and then Ithnasheeri because we follow the twelve Imams. Until about twenty-three years ago, every community was naming itself differently and we said let's standardize the whole thing. Today it has worked out at a slight disadvantage: if someone is looking for us as a Muslim community in the telephone directory they will never find us! They would look under M for Muslim and we are never there.¹

Introduction

The story of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries is dominated by the theme of migration. Historically this has involved three points of conversion: to Islam, to Shi'a and to Ithnasheeri. Geographically it has involved moving from India to East Africa and the subsequent diaspora across the Western world. Unlike the Jewish diaspora, there is no equivalent of Israel or the Promised Land. If there is a 'homeland' in their history it is Zanzibar,² because it provided the most conducive environment for an Islamic way of life. However, if we can speak of a particular character trait of the Khoja Ithnasheeries it is that they are forward looking. In the context of the twenty-first century this means ensuring their spiritual survival, as a branch of Shi'a Islam, in social and cultural contexts pervaded by secular values.

The religious background

The rift between Sunni and Shi'a Islam provides the backdrop to and



means of understanding the Khoja community. This dates back to the conflict over the caliphate that bedevilled early Muslim history. After Abu Bakr and Umar the caliphate passed on to Uthman, but under his rule dissent and even scandal ensued, resulting in his murder. The schism that had developed left Ali as the next in line as caliph, in patriarchal descent from Muhammed, but challenged by an army led by Muhammed's widow A'isha, which he defeated. Opposition then came from the governor of Syria, Mu'awiya, a relative of Uthman, who demanded justice with respect to judgment on the latter's killers. This resulted in the battle at Siffin, on the Euphrates, arbitration which went in favour of Mu'awiya, and then dissent in the ranks of Ali's army which prevented him from pursuing further conflict with Mu'awiya. This dissent resulted in the emergence of the Khawariji faction (from 'Kharaja', meaning 'to go out' or 'to rebel'), who believed that Ali should not have proceeded to arbitration but pursued victory. It was a Kharajite who subsequently stabbed Ali to death in the mosque at Kufa. This resulted in Mu'awiya being recognized as the caliph by the great majority of Muslims, who then identified themselves as 'al-Sunna' (Sunni), attesting to their claim as the repository of orthodoxy in Islam. The followers of Ali took the name of 'Sh'iat Ali' (Shi'a), meaning 'followers of Ali'. The other faction was the Khawarij, who represent the third movement in what emerged as the tripartite division of Islam.³

The caliphate effectively moved from an electoral system to hereditary succession when Mu'awiya gained recognition of his son, Yazid, as the next caliph. This period of the caliphate under Mu'awiya was outwardly effective in ensuring expansion and resistance to dissent through strength and judicious leadership. However, the dissent was there. There was concern that the caliphate had now become a kingdom of Syrian rule, and that the theocracy of Islam, maintained by the patriarchal caliphate down to Ali, had become 'secularized'. In effect, this meant that there was a tide of feeling among opposing factions and within the Sunnis that the precepts of the Qur'ān⁴ and the Sunna of the Prophet were not appropriately observed. This religious objection sat alongside, and was fuelled by, the concern over the hegemony of the Umayyad rule established by Mu'awiya. All this was visited on Yazid after Mu'awiya's death. To still the prospects of revolt, Yazid set about compelling homage from dissenting factions. From the Shi'as Yazid



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demanded this of their leader, Ali's son, Hussein. What followed, from the Shi'a perspective, was the seminal spiritual event of the tragedy of Kerbala, to which we return later.

The history of the Khoja Ithnasheeries

The Khojas, as a branch of Shi'a Islam, emerged in India approximately 600 years ago. These beginnings focus on the figure of Pir Sadraddin, who arrived in Sind. There is some confusion as to his exact identity. Most likely, he was a *Dai* (representative) of the Naziri Branch of the Ismailis. Other sources suggest he was a Sufi teacher from Iran, or even a 'defrocked' Hindu priest who had been caught stealing in the temple.⁵ He converted rich Hindu landowners, Thakkers, within the caste system. To what he converted them it is not entirely clear, possibly to Nizari Ismailis, or to a *Satpanth* (true path) that was a mixture of Sufi and Hindu ideas, by convincing them that Ali was the tenth avatar of Vishnu. Either way, since those who converted could not remain Thakkers within Hindu society, he gave them the title of Khwaja. Khoja is a phonetic corruption of this term.

By the middle of the nineteenth century (CE) what had emerged was an Ismaili Nizari tradition, influenced by the presence of the First Aga Khan arriving in India from Iran, which had spread across Kutch and Gujarat and could also be found in Bombay and Muscat. Thus the Khojas at this time were part of the Ismaili Jamaat Khaana whose allegiance was to the Aga Khan. This arrangement foundered when the Aga Khan dictated that the ownership of all property belonging to the Jamaat should be ceded to him. At this point some Khoja families, disputing the Aga Khan's authority, were made outcasts and became Sunni Muslims. Others had previously been influenced by the teachings of the Mujtahid Sheik Zainul Aabedeem Mazandarani, who sent a representative to India, Mulla Kader Hussein. Some Khoja families left the Ismailis and, under the Mulla, took up the principles of the Shi'a Ithnasheeries. The period of migration from India to East Africa began prior to these events, and continued beyond them as trade relations became established and persisted during this time.

This was the beginning of today's Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries, who number over 100,000, within a total estimated sixty to ninety million Shi'a Ithnasheeries. Khojas outside this tradition consist of over



270,000 Ismailis and a small number of Sunnis. One of the persistent features of the KSI *Jamaats* (community organizations) is their stabilizing influence in periods of migration and dispersion. When this is linked to the traditional Khoja tendency to be involved in commerce and trade, which provides the economic base of Khoja communities, one comes to understand the infrastructure that maintains Khoja community life. From India, the Khojas settled in East Africa within the process of Indian trading along the East African coast. Conversion from the Ismaili to Ithnasheeri often took place after emigration and settlement in Africa. The tenacity, skills and invention required to prosper after such transmigration has given a particular cast of mind and character to the Khoja identity.

Between 1832 and 1964 there was over a century of stability and growth for the Khoja community in East Africa, particularly in the conducive environment in Zanzibar. However, despite economic stability, by the 1930s a degeneration of religious influence was apparent:

People were religious if they attended the daily prayers – the teachings during Ramadhan and Muharram, paid handsome donations to one or other religious cause; but beyond the precincts of the Mosque and the Imambada, there was a territory foreign to the *Ulema* [scholars]; which by mutual understanding was not to be invaded or trespassed.⁶

It was towards the end of this East African period that the federation of the dispersed Khoja Ithnasheeri Jamaats was formed, first in East Africa in 1945, and subsequently incorporating other African countries: Somalia, Madagascar, Mauritius, Zaire and Mozambique in 1961. This initiative was a response to the spiritual regression that had followed years of dispersion in small settlements within East Africa and beyond. It was also a response in recognition of the changes invading Africa as a consequence of modernity. Traditional religious and social identities were being overtaken by new political and economic developments. Critically, among these was the advent of post-colonialism. There is a sense in which the East African Khoja plantations contained the seeds of the diaspora, once the winds of political change, in the form of post-colonial independence, began to conjure up a revolutionary storm. It was the success of Asians in business and economic affairs that required their expulsion. The revolution in Zanzibar in 1964, followed by those in Kenya, Tanzania and finally in Uganda, under Idi Amin in 1972, ended



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this period of settlement and created new challenges in a Western diaspora. The organization of the federation, later to become the world federation, was the key to the social and spiritual survival of the Khoja Ithnasheeries as the diaspora overtook them. The following account is indicative of both the difficulties faced when revolution occurred and the reasons for choosing new places of habitation:

The government set up a revolutionary council. Their priority was giving land to the blacks. ... So if you take, for example, my grandfather. He had plantations, and about five months after the revolution my father was called to the revolutionary council and he was confronted by two black men who said the land, on which our plantation was, was taken by force from their ancestors. And they brought with them an old man who was the witness who said the land was taken from them. My father produced the deeds that this land was bought, they were properly notarized and everything. The revolutionary council gave an immediate decision. They said these documents were under the British and were lies. They tore them up, there and then. So, this land belongs to these black people and is going to be given back to them. Not only that, my father was presented with a bill for the last seventy to eighty years in which my family had prospered by growing and selling crops of I don't know how many millions that we had to give to this family. So my father said he would have to look into this and arrange it. That night he ran away, he left. The next day my mother, sisters, brother, everybody were taken out. They ran away from Zanzibar within twenty-four hours, left everything behind, and came to the mainland. And this was happening all over Zanzibar. ... Different communities were persecuted differently, but basically every community left. ... When we came out of Zanzibar it was not as easy as when we came out of India. It was not a migration over time with a trade already established. It was sudden, and the only country it was easy to get into was Pakistan. India did not recognize us because we were Muslim. But when we arrived in Pakistan, we were still considered as foreigners. Many went to Pakistan, though some went to the mainland (Africa) as well. My family went to Pakistan. But we were all refugees basically but there was no such thing as help for refugees. Things then changed slowly, over a period of time. I was a student here in Britain, so we who had been students here for three years applied for registration of British citizenship. Being of Zanzibarian nationality we had a right to live here and after that we could bring our families over. So slowly, like that, with students taking charge, we were given the responsibility to do something about bringing our families over. So, depending where the first son was



studying, that was where the centre built up. These became established in Toronto, Birmingham, Peterborough, London, Australia and New Zealand, because there was a boy studying in New Zealand.⁷

The challenges of diaspora

Diaspora did not begin in 1964 since any Khoja community experienced it outside Zanzibar. Thus, in a sense, it was a situation that many Khoja Ithnasheeries knew well and the key factor in their reaction to these situations concerned religious freedom, as the following comment makes clear:

But there is an important point here in relation to spirituality. The primary reason we left India was a religious one, because of our religious practices, not having freedom in this respect. In Zanzibar it was different. There were mosques everywhere, there was a common greeting and that really made all the Khojas feel at home. This was not so on the mainland. We could not blend in with the local tribes in Kenya because they were not Muslim. That was the difference. And since then, it has been a struggle to blend in with the local culture: in the West, in Kenya, in Tanzania because the majority of the population are Christians. The single factor that allowed us that freedom was common religious practice. In situations where we find the practices contradict ours, we become more cautious. For example, you will not find Khojas socializing with natives of this country because the practices are different. The same was true in Mombassa [Kenya] where they drank alcohol and ate pork.⁸

The challenges presented in the West are, arguably, much greater than those presented in East Africa. These challenges relate most specifically to the upbringing of first-generation Khoja children. Jaffer Dharamsi explains this by contrasting his own upbringing in Zanzibar with that of Khoja children in the United Kingdom:

After school they go and play with their friends and they offer them something to eat and drink and they have to say no. You see, it all presents problems. For me in Zanzibar I used to go to a friend's house, he would come to my house. Food was not a problem; girl-boy separation was not a problem. For our children it is something they have to deal with and we try to teach them how to deal with it.⁹

The significant issue in the difference between Dharamsi's experience and that of the children in the West is one of being in a culture that you feel you have some ownership of and one where you need to



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create your own separate culture. It falls to the present adult generation to establish this and to the next generation to maintain it. The need to preserve identity in the context of new cultural influences has made the Jamaat, as a centre of worship and a place of belonging, a critical force for survival. As, more recently over the past forty years, Khojas have dispersed further into the Western world, the pervasiveness of secularism in the wider culture has brought a new challenge to their relationship with the social and cultural environment in which they find themselves:

The new generation, born and bred in the West is questioning the modus operandi and the insularity of the community while the old guard insists upon retaining what has worked well for the community for almost a century.¹⁰

It is in this context of balancing the tensions of integration and cultural influence on the one hand, and the maintenance of tradition and community identity on the other, that the spiritual legacy of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeri identity emerges as the important factor. Within this new context of rapid globalization with its late capitalist economic character, the Khojas represent a pertinent case study for the survival of traditional religious communities dispersed across continents. In the process of migration, Khojas are now distributed across Europe, North America and the Antipodes. These families and communities are locally comparatively small in number and increasingly distant from their origins in East Africa and beyond that in India. While the economic base of capitalism has worked in favour of the survival of the Khojas, given their traditional occupation as traders, the values of Western and globalized capitalism represent a severe threat to the preservation and promotion of their faith. In a case study of the North American situation the problem is identified as follows:

Today there is much less intermarriage in the community. ... More and more boys and girls from the Khoja Community are marrying into non-Khoja ... and even non Muslim communities. In this respect, the ethnic barrier has come down. Increasingly, even the religious barrier is being breached. ... Pockets of the community members are scattered in small hamlets all over North America. The social fabric of the supportive society as was known in East Africa is virtually non existent in many parts of North America. As a result, contacts between families are diminishing While loss of ethnicity is tolerable; can we tolerate loss of our religious identity?¹¹



In the migration to Western societies, the reliance on an extended or joint family system that was in place in East Africa has been eroded. Within this and the Jamaat, most social needs were met. Typically, the extended family lived under one roof, and occupation providing the economic underpinning of family life was local, whether based on agriculture, industry or trading. Family roles were gender-specific, with the men working and the women engaged in the home. Family authority was patriarchal with the eldest male as the head.¹²

The Khoja response to this new situation is consistent with their competitive spirit. Within change, they seek to create influence that will ensure their survival as a religious or spiritual community. In order to do so, cross-global, as well as local, communication has become a key factor. The establishment of the World Federation in London in 1976 has been the key initiative. Its four regional federations are linked through the internet, and research initiatives and developments in different Khoja communities appear on its website. Since the period of migration began in the mid-1960s communities encompass three or four generations. Typically, the oldest generations are the initial immigrants, their children are now the working adults in the present community, and their children are the first generation Khojas after migration born in the new host country. It is this last generation that is the focus of most concern for the communities. The question of how to educate this generation, who are most susceptible to secular values and yet represent the future of Khoja faith and religious identity, is the focus of major debate and activity, as indicated below:

The question one needs to ask here is: 'Do I feel content with the upbringing of my own children ... ? How do I feel about their outlook, understanding and behaviour?' If I feel satisfied with their development so far, then there is hope for my offspring to live up to my expectations 50 years from today. On the other hand, if, for any reason, I feel concerned or somewhat unhappy ... and feel that they do not quite measure up to my expectations ... what prospects can I then foresee ... 50 years from today?¹³

An indication of how these concerns manifest themselves in relation to children's lives and experiences can be gleaned from the following address. At the celebration of specific events in the religious calendar, ten minutes is given for an address by one of the children



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or youth of the community in an initiative to involve the young in religious and spiritual affairs as active participants. This extract is taken from a short lecture delivered at the Husaini Islamic Centre, Stanmore, UK during Ramadhan on 14 December 1999. The speaker is an 11-year-old boy:

My Dad always tells me that being a Muslim is the easiest thing to do. Our Prophet he says has never meant life to be difficult or painful to the point where you feel that being a Muslim means a life of continued hardship and sacrifices without fun.

Although I agree with my Dad, sometimes I feel that we live on two different planets. He has not been to the same school as I have – most certainly – and he has no idea regarding what my friends get up to or watch on TV or read.

My friends – I have so many non-Muslim friends – seem to be having so much fun and I feel at times that I am being forced not to enjoy . . .

Furthermore, none of my friends have to worry about Salla or Saum or learning Koran and Duas. At home they can do whatever they like . . . I also find that so much of my life is spent in the Stanmore Centre – whereas my friends just play and have fun and follow in the steps of their heroes . . . (including the Spice girls). . . . My life seems to be filled so much with trying to be a Muslim than enjoying without worry. So much fuss being a Muslim.¹⁴

As he continues from this point, the boy speaks of the joy and importance of learning about the Prophet, the insufficiency of Western science, and the importance of deciding to follow the Prophet. However, there is a discontinuity between the two parts of the talk that suggests a struggle of resolution between his Muslim identity and the influences in his wider secular environment.

In certain obvious respects there is a similarity between the diasporic experience of the Khojas and that of Jewish communities. The Khojas are relatively small in number, though they belong to a wider Shi'a tradition. Their strength lies in the high level of education equipping them well economically, professionally and in terms of acceptance and value within the larger host society. The challenges lie in the increasing effect of secularization on the young as they grow up within a host society whose values are less rooted in traditional authority and more susceptible to plural and non-religious influences. The counter to this effect lies in the spiritual narrative of Shi'a Islam, and most distinctively in revisiting the tragedy of Kerbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his



family. The significance of this event is comparable to that of the Exodus within the Jewish community.

The tragedy of Kerbala

The tragedy of Kerbala forms a central, if not the central, event that inspires the spiritual and moral sensitivities of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeri tradition. Occurring in 61 AH, it marks the death of Imam Hussein at the hands of the armies of Yazid, who had united with Mu'awiya to control and expand Muslim rule. Hussein represented the descent from the prophet Muhammed that opposed them, Yazid and his followers; understanding themselves to be true Muslims, they rejected Mu'awiya's ambition as a corruption of the *Ummah* (brotherhood or community). The event took place as Hussein's caravan proceeded to Kufa. It was interrupted by Yazid's army, and Hussein was told to pledge *Bai'at* (allegiance) to Yazid and informed that not to do so could cost him his life. His reply is attested as follows:

Are you threatening me with death? Death is many thousands of times better than the dishonour of Bai'at to an enemy of Islam. Do you not see that truth is not being practiced and falsehood is not being prevented? I see death as a blessing and life with its tyrants as the most disgusting state one can be in.¹⁵

The outcome was the slaying of those in his caravan, including women and children, his wife and his son. Finally, Hussein climbs upon a sand-dune and cries out, 'Who is there who would assist us?' The puzzle of whom he was calling to when all his followers were dead is interpreted prophetically: 'He was calling out to the future generations to continue his frustrated cause of doing *amr bil ma'ruf and nahya anil munkar*' (enjoining others to do good).¹⁶ In other words the martyr to the truth calls out to those in the future to be further witnesses to the truth after his example. This is what inspires the mourning and remembrance of Hussein in the *aza-e-Hussein* (remembrance or witness to Hussein) among Shi'a communities in the months of Muharram and Safar. The significance of Kerbala extends beyond the commemoration at this time and the importance of just Imam Hussein himself, as the following commentary explains:



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One thing that the Shi'as are accused of by the wider Muslim community is that we have elevated Kerbala such that it is greater than the Prophet himself. But the answer to that, in my opinion, is that Kerbala, because of all the categories of people involved, provides a lesson for all the community: from the baby to the old man; for the women and the girls. There was somebody at Kerbala that represented each age group of our community and how that person at Kerbala dealt with the problem is the lesson. Over the last 1,300 years, people have analysed and books have been written about it that we have read and we are now able to do that. So, when we raise our children we place a lot of importance on the life of the Prophet, the Hadith of the Prophet and the Prophet's immediate time, but we always go to Kerbala because there we can pictorially demonstrate. 'Look, this is what the Prophet said, this is how this person in Kerbala dealt with it and showed that, as a Muslim, this problem can be solved in this way', and this is why Kerbala is important, because there are so many aspects of Kerbala that we can look at and apply to our daily lives and deal with it.

To give you a personal example, I lost a son in a car accident; he was 20 years old, to me that day was a devastating blow. On the same day, he was buried. I went to the funeral and came back and sat down with the friends and relatives around me. But the mulla who went to the mimba and started reciting a majlis for that day, he did not talk about me, my son or the suffering in my heart. There was nothing at all about that. He went straight to Kerbala and he talked about Imam Hussein and how he dealt with the death of his teenage son, how difficult it was for him and yet, at the same time, this is how he dealt with it. To me this man was telling me 'I don't know how you feel, because I have not lost a son, but I can tell you how the great leaders of our community in the past have dealt with it. This is how he dealt with it and there is a lesson there for you.' That to me was so powerful. It gave me so much strength, and I thought, OK, I've lost my son but there are other people who have lost their sons. That does not mean that I can just sit back and say 'Oh God, how could you do this to me'. So, I picked myself up within a day because of that story of Kerbala. This happens all the time. I have noticed since that time, whenever somebody loses someone Kerbala is brought in and they pick a point and say look, learn from this. So, Kerbala we use as a lesson, and that is it.¹⁷

Spiritual continuity

From 1,300 years ago to the present, this narrative thread has been maintained. Continuing to maintain it is the responsibility incumbent



on present and future generations whose situation is very different to that of the first telling. However, there is one significant similarity: oppressive circumstances are not strangers in either context or throughout Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeri history. The key to the maintenance and development of the spirituality of the communities appears to lie in three important institutional functions: *medrassa*, *dhakiri* and *fatwa*.

In the Western context the *medrassa*, or faith school, provides the religious teaching and spiritual development of the young, from 7 until 16. However, those who teach in the *medrassas* are not trained teachers in the state education system. More often than not they are mothers who have been encouraged to act in a volunteer capacity. Here there is a development issue. The youngsters, brought up within the wider, secular environment, are accustomed to a form of enquiry, in state schools, that preferences questioning over instruction. They bring this questioning to their *medrassa* classes and are dissatisfied with responses that do not give sufficient explanation or teaching that is not engaging. This is being addressed by careful monitoring of faith schools, providing resources for teachers, a common syllabus to follow and seminars for pedagogical training across Europe. Initiatives in determining whether separate Islamic schools within the state system would be helpful are being investigated, as is the possibility of accrediting *medrassa* teachers within teacher training. The major issue to be addressed is whether *medrassa* education can prove effective for the young without recourse to a system of schooling that is entirely Islamic in character and ethos. Beyond this, there is the influence of higher education on Khoja Ithnasheeri youth. With a high percentage of young Khojas being encouraged to enter university, to further their professional careers, there is a backlash in terms of the questioning of inherited values.¹⁸

Beyond *medrassa* education and the importance of education generally, there is the need for strong religious leadership in the Jamaats. *Dhakiri* literally means the narration of a story. A *dhakir* is the one who narrates. The *dhakir* must always be factual (in relation to Hadith), but must also move the audience, spiritually and emotionally, at a *majlis* (gathering). The importance of accuracy is borne out in the following account:

One story that comes to my mind is of a very learned man who used to give lectures. Suddenly he stopped. People were coming and asking him, because he was such a good orator, to instruct them. He would not. He



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still taught students but would never stand up in public and say anything. Years later a student asked him why. He said: I was reciting a talk and during the talk, about Kerbala, I got so emotional talking about the sons of Hussein who were there that I got the numbers wrong. One too many but I didn't correct it; I just carried on, being carried away. But that night I went to bed and dreamt it was the end of the world. It was finished and we were now on the day of judgement and preparing ourselves to answer for our deeds. I was called to one side. The Prophet was sitting there and said, 'You know, you did a fantastic job in the world, but one day you spoke about Kerbala, I don't know if you remember this, but this is what you said' – and he repeated it and asked, 'Where did you get that reference [Hadith] from?' He said he got it from one of the books. The Prophet asked, 'Which book?' The Prophet got all the books he mentioned. He could not find the reference. In the end the *dhakir* said, 'I think, maybe, it was something I made up.' The Prophet said, 'Your job was to stand up and tell what happened in history to guide them not misguide them.' After that dream, when he woke up in the morning, he decided, 'I will never speak in public again, because the responsibility is so great I cannot take that responsibility.' Though it was just a minor point, the accountability is so great.¹⁹

While others may act as *dhakirs*, being invited speakers at a *majlis*, it is the resident Mulla who must cohere the religious direction of a Jamaat and ensure its spiritual vitality. Appointing the right person to this role in a Western context is of the utmost importance and involves cultural considerations of great sensitivity in relation to membership, especially across generations. Within the Shi'a communities ultimate religious authority lies with the appointed Ayatollah. The appointment of an Ayatollah comes about through a request from the particular Shi'a community. His authority then becomes the ultimate source of guidance, and provides the reference for resolution to contemporary problems, as is explained in the following account:

In Shi'ism we don't have the concept of a hierarchy of religious leaders, just scholars, people who devote their life to religion. Some scholars reach a level that is so high that other scholars come and refer to them. It reaches a point where one scholar becomes the most knowledgeable to date. Mulla Asghar [the President of the World Federation] is self-taught [he did not go to theological college] but he is considered to be one of the greatest scholars in our community. People outside our community refer to him on religious matters. One of the grand Ayatollahs [Seestani] has appointed him as his agent; someone we can refer to. Whatever he says



we can accept because he is satisfied with the religious knowledge of Mulla Asghar.²⁰

So, if I have any problem or want any religious matter answered I would have referred to Mulla Bashir [the previous leader of the Wessex Jamaat]. Bashir would say, 'I know the answer because I have come across this before.' He will give me the reference. Or he will turn round to me and say, 'Sorry, Jaffer, I don't know the answer to this one but I will get the answer for you.' He will then go one step up to Mulla [Mulla Asghar] because he considers Mulla more theological than him. Mulla will then say, 'This is the answer' but he does not have to give a reference because he is the agent of the Ayatollah. But if I say I need the reference he will give it to me. Or Mulla Asghar may say, 'This problem is contemporary, it is something new. I haven't come across it.' He will then contact whom he thinks is more knowledgeable than him, the Ayatollah Seestani. He will sit with him or write to him and say, 'This is the question I have been asked and it is something I have not come across.'

At this point the Ayatollah will consider the whole thing. He might ask for more clarification, he might consult other experts in the field and, at the end of this, he will issue what is called a *fatwa*. He will write it down, sign it and send it. That *fatwa* then becomes a point of reference. From then on, that question will always be answered based on the *fatwa* of Ayatollah Seestani. A collection of *fatwas* on contemporary issues is now on our website. They are also in a book form.²¹ Living in the West has become quite difficult and this is how we consider the issues that arise. An example would be the business question of dealing in alcohol. He does not give a reference, just the *fatwa*, unless you request it, or ask him to elaborate. Seestani is the Ayatollah the majority of the Khojas follow.²²

Conclusion

This study of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries obviously does not have a conclusion because the Khojas themselves are still in the process of transition. But it is highly instructive in a number of ways. First, if we were to think that Western society is moving inexorably towards a system of secular values we would be ignoring the huge impact that plural values will have on the globalization of society. Second, we would be ignoring the determination of religious communities to sustain their own identities. Third, we would be underestimating the capacity of particular minority religious communities, in a Western



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context, to sustain their own cultures. The struggle of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries in their diaspora acts as a telling reminder of the persistence of religion and Islamic resurgence. While the economic base for this is financial sufficiency, the motivation is spiritual survival. Provided there are strategies for cultural transition the outcome is a sustainable community that has to be recognized and can provide a valuable service to the wider modern world.

Notes

1. Jaffer Dharamsi, Co-ordinator of the European Khoja community website, interview on 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex, UK. It will be noticed, as this study proceeds, that Jaffer is a name which figures prominently. Its derivation is as follows. Jaffer literally means creek or river. More significantly, the Shi'as follow the sixth Imam who was called Jaffer al Sadiq. He was also the father of Shi'ite jurisprudence and hence we find Shi'as often called Jafaris and the name Jaffer becoming commonplace. My thanks for this explanation goes to Mustafa Jaffer, director of the Khoja Religious Education Centre.
2. 'It was one of the most peaceful places in the world, a haven of peace. There was a very good co-existence between Arabs, Africans, Indians and Europeans. The culture was essentially Arab. But when the revolution took place, in 1964, our people were driven out, the Arabs were forced to leave. Life became intolerable there because of the change in politics.' Asgherali M.M. Jaffer, President of the Khoja Ithnasheeri World Federation, interview 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.
3. A fuller and more substantial summary account of this period can be found in L. Vaglieri (1970), 'The patriarchal and Umayyad Caliphates', in P. Holt, A. Lambton and B. Lewis (eds), *The Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 1: The Central Islamic Lands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 57-103.
4. Transliteration of Islamic terms is not consistent in the Khoja literature. I have tried to introduce consistency in this chapter but I also provide alternatives in the index.
5. For a summary of Khoja history see *History of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries*, www.world-federation.org/wfkhoja.htm. For the East African period in particular see M. M. Jaffer Asgharali (n.d.), *An Outline History of Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeri in East Africa* (Harefield, Middlesex: Dar al Tableegh).
6. Asgharali, *An Outline History*, p. 14.
7. Jaffer Dharamsi, interview 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.



8. Shaik Mustafa Jaffer, interview 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.
9. Jaffer Dharamsi, interview 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.
10. *History of the Khoja Shi'a Ithnasheeries*, www.world-federation.org/wfkhoja.htm, p. 3.
11. Hassan Ali Jaffer (1999), *Case for Survival: Challenge Facing the Community in North America*, www.world-federation.org/bigissue/education.htm, pp. 13–14.
12. For an analysis of the Khoja Community and the challenge of social change, see Sister Fatma Husein (1999), *W(h)ither Our Community*, www.world-federation.org/ourcommunity.htm. The above summary of traditional family structure is derived from this article. For a larger debate on this issue, see also *Our Marriage Ways, Will They Survive into the Next Millenium: Proceedings of an International Conference, Birmingham, 8 March 1998* (Birmingham, UK: The Khoja Ithna-sheri Muslim Community of Birmingham).
13. Hassan Ali Jaffer, *Case for Survival: Challenge Facing the Community in North America*, www.world-federation.org/bigissue/education.htm, pp. 3–4.
14. Sajjad Meghjee, Husaini Islamic Centre, Stanmore, Tuesday 14 December 1999/Eve 6 Ramadan 1420, www.world-federation.org/Article/stanmoresajjadtalk.
15. B. Rahim (1998) *Dhakiri: Part 1, The Evolution of Dhakiri*, www.world-federation.org/research/ieb, p. 8.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
17. Jaffer Dharamsi, interview 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.
18. 'For the first time they are exposed to a campus, and might look back on those earlier days and say, "Well, they were doctrinaire or dogmatic. We were just told do this and believe. Here we are now exposed to the world of intellect and intelligent debate." So, we have now, I myself and my colleagues, have got to make some arrangements for such boys and girls also to come and discuss with us. The clash is one of values.' Interview with Asqherali M.M. Jaffer, President of the Khoja Ithnasheeri World Federation, 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.
19. Jaffer Dharamsi, interview 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.
20. Sadly, Mulla Asghar died shortly after this interview took place. At the time of writing, the Khoja Community is still seeking a leader to replace him.
21. Abdul Hadi al-Hakim (1999), *A Code of Practice for Muslims in the West* (London: Imam Ali Foundation). The other major source of authority is the fundamentals of Islamic law according to the *fatwa* of Ayatollah Seestani. Produced in English as Ayatollah Seestani (1994), *Islamic Laws* (Harefield, Middlesex: Dar al Tableegh).
22. Jaffer Dharamsi, interview 28 February 2000, Stanmore, Middlesex.



15. Street spirituality

A narrative case study of a street community

Jane Erricker

Citizenship gives pupils the knowledge, skills and understanding to play an effective role in society at local, national and international levels. It helps them to become informed, thoughtful and responsible citizens who are aware of their duties and rights. It promotes their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, making them more self-confident and responsible both in and beyond the classroom. It encourages pupils to play a helpful part in the life of their schools, neighbourhoods, communities and the wider world.¹

Introduction

This chapter is an unusual one in a book of this sort. The other studies in this book describe and explain the lives and works of people who have been identified as 'spiritual', or describe and explain communities where people live lives that can be characterized in the same way through religious affiliation. In making this statement I am assuming a particular and commonly understood and accepted judgement about the definition of 'spiritual', and obviously choices were made about who to include in this book on the basis of that commonly accepted definition. What is that definition? It is not easy to put into words, and would certainly vary if you were to ask different experts, but there are certain elements that would probably be included.

These would be some kind of other-worldliness, a connection with the transcendent, a feeling of union with something beyond our



earthly, mundane existence. It could also be more moral in tone – an intuition about what is right and true, a sense of meaning and purpose. The people and communities that have been written about in this book are trying to work out what these elusive and ephemeral notions might mean in practice and to live their lives accordingly, but with an attention to the realities of religious and social affairs. However, for the majority of ordinary people, living lives which are overtly spiritual is not really an option, either because they have duties and responsibilities that restrict their choices, or because they are not temperamentally suited to that kind of introspection and reflection. Some people may of course have a religious faith, which gives them a context in which they can feel spiritual, and perhaps a weekly opportunity to practise that feeling in a communal and liturgical setting. However, in the developed West, particularly in Britain, America and Europe, institutionalized religious faith appears more and more out of date and inadequate for modern life and has lost its hold on the population.

Does this mean that people no longer have a need for spirituality? Or does it mean that the feelings are still there, still needing expression and nurture, but that the available vocabulary is possessed by religion? People do not talk about being or feeling spiritual because it sounds as if they are religious, and it would be dishonest or at least incongruous to allow other people to jump to the conclusion that that was what was meant. Yet people still need meaning and purpose, they still want to feel connected and nurtured, they still want to be taken out of themselves, to feel awe and wonder, to marvel and to sense immense possibilities, to know beauty and truth and right. So are they finding other ways to connect with these feelings, and other vocabularies with which to express them that cannot be misunderstood as being religious? These means of expression may well be no less authentic than the more overtly religious activities, but of course they are not legitimated by tradition and so are chosen partly for that very reason.

One can feel connected and nurtured with a counsellor, one can be taken out of oneself dancing in a club, climbing a mountain or bungee jumping. Beauty and truth can be found in an art gallery, or looking at one's children, or reading poetry. One can look with awe and wonder at the night sky, or animals in a zoo, or a wildlife programme on television. One can feel all these things, and ecstasy, in a passionate sexual relationship. The feelings that make up



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spirituality are all there in our everyday life, but because they are not packaged and labelled as a religious faith, and don't come as one convenient bundle, they are somehow not acknowledged as true spirituality. I believe that these kinds of feelings are understood at an intuitive level and that when we recognize that others have similar feelings to our own we begin to form relationships with them, and these feelings act as a sort of mortar that binds a community together.

This chapter is intended to be an investigation into this type of ordinary, everyday spirituality, the sort that isn't necessarily labelled as spirituality but that makes a small community work. This is comparable perhaps to the notion of ordinary virtues that are investigated in Todorov's² study, mentioned in Chapter 8, but without the extremes of the situation that he examines. I wanted to investigate these feelings within such a community.

As I begin to write this chapter I realize that my style of writing is becoming clichéd. I am writing in the prose of a storyteller because this is a story, in the ageless tradition of stories about ordinary people. It's the prose of women's magazines, of soap operas on television, the Archers on the radio, the Waltons, the Little House on the Prairie. But this is what it is. It is a small narrative, not a grand narrative.³ It is a Bakhtinian novel and not an epic.⁴ Although the grand narratives of religion, class and nationality form the usually unacknowledged bedrock of the lives of ordinary people, those ordinary lives go on without reference to the grander themes beneath, and the spirituality of everyday life is constructed from something much more mundane. Everyday spirituality is a delicate, dynamic web of relationships which, while appearing fragile enough as to be almost unseen, is nevertheless sufficiently strong to support a community. It is nourished by the serendipitous meetings in the road, by the casual enquiry about one's well-being, by the offer of help in hard times. It is food left on the doorstep, a cup of coffee and someone to listen, a hug when you need it. It is people who know you well enough not to have to ask too much, people who tease you about your new car. It is close to being a family, but without the pressure of duty.

Talking to people

The small community I chose to investigate is the street where I live,



and the data I have collected consists of the stories of the people who live there. I went from house to house with my tape-recorder and asked everybody to tell me about living in the street. I asked how long they had lived there, whether they liked living there and their reasons for their answers. Part of my data was my own story because I live there too, and because of this it might be viewed as an unusual piece of research. I, the insider writer of this research, have several different roles to play in its construction. I am the research instrument as I collect other people's stories, I am the subject of the research as I have included my own story, and I am the interpreter of the research as I comment on the stories and write the chapter. This is certainly 'insider' research. The chapter will thus be interspersed with fragments of my autobiography because I am intimately bound up with the events that have shaped this small community. It is a Lyotardian⁵ 'small narrative' that I shall be telling (constructing), set within the grand narratives of nationality, class, war, religion and dealing with the inevitable themes of birth and death and, in the non-religious context I am examining, the imperceptible rites of transition. Lyotard, in *Le Differend*,⁶ says that narrative has a privilege in the way it assembles diversity. It is a genre that seems to be able to admit all others. There is an affinity between the people and the narrative, and the popular form of language is the small, de-ritualized narrative. To paraphrase Lyotard, people like to tell stories and, in particular, they like to tell stories about themselves. This is how we as people – as children and adults – express our similarities with and differences from other people. These stories that people tell about their lives and experiences are Lyotard's 'small narratives', the little stories which challenge and define the meta-narratives – the grand stories of ideology and moral prescription.

I have realized that I will have to be particularly careful about misrepresentation because I will have to continue to live with these people whose stories I am telling, and in particular interpreting. This is an important ethical issue with any kind of insider research, and I have carefully considered how I might ensure that representation is negotiated and agreed. In common with ethnographic work of this kind that I have carried out previously, I have engaged in a process of consultation with the subjects of the research to ensure that I have understood what they were saying.

I have raised the question of representation with each of the



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people I have interviewed, and told them that they can see the chapter before I give it to the publisher, and if there is anything they don't like I will take it out. I have not offered to change what I have written because, as author, it is my right – not only that, it is my job, my *raison d'être*, to interpret what is said to me in the interviews.

However, I am not only the data collector and interpreter but also the subject of this research. This means that my account of the street is as valid as anyone else's account, but comes to the reader of this chapter without one of the usual stages in the research process, that of interpretation by the researcher. My story is, as it were, raw, while everyone else's account is processed, and the reader of this chapter must take that into consideration.

Describing the street

I will now describe the context of this research, in other words the situation of the street whose story I am telling. The street is a cul-de-sac in a small seaside town on the south coast of Britain. It is about three hundred yards and five narrow roads back from the sea and from the high street, which runs parallel to the sea. During the winter the town is deserted and wind-swept, but in the summer it is full of day trippers visiting the beaches. The sea between the town and the Isle of Wight is frequently crowded with the sails of yachts and wind-surfers. The sea plays an important part in the life of the whole community, in part because many of the inhabitants are, or have been, in the Navy.

The street itself is very small, containing only nine houses. There are two sets of semi-detached two-storey houses on one side, built in the 1920s, double-fronted with bay windows. On the other side there is one pair of three-storey town houses built around 1900, another pair of semi-detached two-storey houses and finally a detached slim house, all probably built around the same time. At the closed end of the cul-de-sac there are two more houses of more recent vintage, but these back onto the road and officially belong to a different street. One, however, has always been part of the street in spirit, and the other was once, but when it changed hands a few years ago the erection of a tall fence around the garden cut off the inhabitants from the rest of the street. The front gardens of the houses in the street are narrow and the street itself will barely take three cars



alongside each other. This means that when cars are parked down one side there is room for a car to drive down the street, but cars parked on both sides will block the road, a situation that requires sensitivity and, at times, negotiation. There are narrow grass verges on which cars sometimes park, but occasional trees make this difficult. The street once had four or five large mature trees but these blew down in the great storm of 1987, temporarily blocking the road. Now there are new young trees growing to take their place. We might say that constraints of space, linearity of construction and closeness of residence are important geographical and architectural features in the shaping and interaction of the community.

The recent history

I have gleaned the history of the street from the fragments that have been given to me by the people I have interviewed, and from my own memory. Eileen's family, her family by birth rather than her family by marriage, have lived in the street for many years. Chris, Eileen's husband, and her youngest son James live in number 4, and Chris said that Eileen's family used to live in number 9 and her brother Trevor was born there. Her grandparents lived in number 3. Eileen's mother lived in number 4 with a varying population of cats when we first moved into the street nineteen years ago. Eileen herself had left the street for a brief time but soon moved back with her family, to share the house with her mother until her mother died. Eileen herself died suddenly this year and has been very much missed. Polly, my youngest child, in particular misses her because Eileen looked after her after school for a while, and was always there if there were any problems and I wasn't at home (their house is directly opposite ours). Polly says, 'It's like a little community. Everyone knows everyone. If your parents are going away for a while then the other neighbours know. You can always get help if you need it. When Sam [her brother] cut his arm Eileen took him to hospital. Liz and Eileen used to look after me when I was younger after school.'

The event of Eileen's death elicited palpable expression of much that was never formally stated. The following comments were written as it became known.

Throughout this morning we have watched the news of a death pass down the street and be passed on in the families. We have also been part



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of this passing on, in both senses. Emotions have been stirred. The palpable sense of loss has elicited anger, dismay, pity and compassion. A quiet has descended as though we are all moving as slowly as possible in order not to create more disturbance. Time has almost stopped. There is nothing to be done and yet so much is happening. Most obviously there is a numbness in the air created by the shock waves following the silent, unexpected explosion. All the unanswerable questions hang in this numb expression of disbelief.⁷

The day of the funeral brought the public affirmation of loss in a ritual of remembrance. It started with the gathering of Eileen's and Chris' extended family in the house, and spilled on to the street as they waited for the hearse, which backed down to the end of the road. This became the signal for other families to appear in the street and line it in an impromptu fashion before falling in behind the family in procession to the church. This solidarity acted not only to honour the death but to affirm the community left behind. The silence was only broken by the insistent tread of so many walking in line together – a conspicuously uncommon ritual.

The pattern of moving within the street was repeated by Liz and Ned, who came as newly-weds to number 7 but then moved to a bigger house, number 9, and David and Trisha moved into the vacated number 7. Last year Ned had a diving accident and has been in a coma ever since, leaving Liz alone with her two children, but she doesn't want to move away. Molly, who now lives on her own in number 8, after her husband Eric died suddenly a few years ago just before retiring, helps and supports Liz. Number 6, which is the other half of our house, is split into three flats and has the most fluid population of the whole street, changing from older, retired tenants to younger, owner-occupiers. David, in number 7, misses Eric very much. Charley and Betty used to live with their youngest daughters in one of the houses at the end of the street, houses that were officially part of another road. Charley was a retired naval pilot who flew one of the last Swordfish planes, and his unwavering nationalism became plain when, during the Falklands War, he flew a huge Union Jack between the trees in his garden. Betty died of a heart attack, and Charley died of grief about six weeks later. They were good and kind neighbours, who sold us part of their large garden for a very low price, and generally kept an eye on us when we were young and inexperienced parents. The people who have moved into their house have immediately erected a six-foot fence



around their garden, cutting themselves off from the street and from us.

Mo was one of the most recent occupants of the ground floor flat in number 6. She was black, but no one ever mentioned it because it never seemed to be an issue. Perhaps it was because she was in the Navy and knew Chris and Eileen, and the web of relationships as very quickly established. She was a very outgoing and gregarious person. David said that she was someone who made events happen. While she was in the street we had bonfires in her garden before it was refurbished and then we had barbecues and impromptu parties. I miss her very much because we used to chat over the garden hedge.

The narrator's story

Who am I? I am a member of this small community. I have lived in this street for the past nineteen years. When I moved here with my family I was pregnant with our second child, our son who is now 19 years old. Our first daughter was 2 years old and our third child was born while we were living here. She is now 15. For the first ten years of our time in the street I didn't work full time and so, looking after the children, I was more immersed in the street life. There were several families with small children and the houses and gardens of the street, and the street itself, formed a communal playing area. If anyone wanted their child they went out into the street and called, and someone would answer. Either 'I'm in here,' or 'I've got all the children in my house.' As the children grew a little older they knew they were not allowed to go to the end of the street, but were safe and trusted within the circle of their friends' homes. Parents at home with their children spent some of their time drinking tea and coffee with each other while watching the children play.

As the children grew older their friendships changed. My youngest daughter talked on the phone to her friend across the street while they looked at each other in their windows. All through their childhoods the children in the street invited each other to birthday parties and, even as they grew older, if my children were having problems with their wider circle of friends at birthdays I always said, 'Well, why don't you just invite the street?' The adults gave impromptu barbecues on warm summer evenings, and every Christmas morning the street would come round to our house for pre-Christmas dinner drinks. The millennium



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New Year's Eve was planned as a street party, but the threat of bad weather turned it into a party at our house.

Community

How can you define community? A community is defined by proximity, and by underlying beliefs and values. In other communities that have been described in this book the beliefs and values form the primary motivation in the formation of the community. Proximity comes later, when the people who hold beliefs and values in common decide to gather and live their lives together in an expression of those beliefs and values. This communal life involves the ritual expression of these beliefs and values so that they are kept uppermost in the minds and hearts of the inhabitants of the community and are constantly reminded of why they are there together. When, in the other chapters in this book, various community lives are described, the need for proximity is taken for granted, even though it can be much less localized, and more organization is required to ensure communal gathering and the distribution of information. It is the rituals, the beliefs and values that are interesting, and these defining attributes therefore pre-date the formation of these overtly spiritual or religious communities and are the reason why the community is formed. In the case of the street, the proximity is the defining characteristic. We didn't knowingly buy our houses in the street because of the beliefs and values of the rest of the people there. We didn't even know them at the time. However, that doesn't mean that our buying a house in this street wasn't an expression of our beliefs and values. We believed that it was safer and better for our children to live in a road without fast traffic. We didn't want to live hidden behind tall fences, but we wanted to be in contact with our neighbours. We felt that houses in long, straight rows were somehow heartless and we wanted to live in a group, a huddle of houses. We didn't want to live in a 'posh' area. We wanted to live in a small town, close to the sea, where we would get to know people and greet them when we went shopping. All these reasons for our choice of a home reveal our beliefs and our values, in particular the value we place on community.

The majority of us in the street bought our houses because they were old and therefore the right size for the right price, and



because we thought that a cul-de-sac would be peaceful and good for the children, especially with other families living in the street. The children would be able to form good relationships with the other children and to have people to play with. Eileen and Chris had a different reason for being in the street because Eileen's family had lived here previously. In more conventional spiritual or religious communities, relationships between members of those communities are formed under the umbrella of the overt belief and value system. The members are expected to conform to the system or to leave the community, or at least, in recognizing their spiritual estrangement from it, absent themselves. In the case of the street, the formation of relationships is optional and organic. We do have those underlying beliefs and values in common that made us choose to live in the street, but they are not formally expressed and certainly not formally ritualized. However, in the introduction to this chapter I talked about the actions which sustain and nourish relationships in the street and in a sense these can be considered as ritual. I ask my neighbours how things are going, James always calls me a poser when I put the hood down on my car, Chris always asks me to wash his car as well when I'm doing mine; but these rituals are not externally determined. They grow and have grown organically, dialogically⁸ and responsively, and strengthen and nourish relationships between neighbours as surely as a prayer and a chant strengthens and nourishes our relationship with God. These verbal rituals can be compared with Lyotard's popular sayings which he says are 'like little splinters of potential narratives or molds of old ones'.⁹ They are steps in the construction of the narrative of the street, the narrative that defines and sustains us as a community.

Not everyone in the street carries out these rituals and not everyone considers himself or herself as belonging to the community in the same way. There are those who have held themselves apart, possibly because they are shy and not necessarily gregarious, or possibly for other reasons. However, there is no one in the street who one feels would not help if there were a problem.

Relationships

What are the relationships within the street? There are relationships established between adults, between young people, and between



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children and adults. In the adult-to-adult relationships there is a gender difference – male and female relationships are different. Stereotypically, the women talk about family and domestic issues while the men talk about cars, sport and local and national politics. A lot of this talking is done in the street on sunny days, though some is done at the social events held in the street. Some people see each other in the pub or at the various naval establishments. However, although the subject matter of the talking might be different, it is the act of talking itself that is the means by which the relationships are constructed. Again it is the nurturing and support given by someone simply taking an interest in one's everyday life. It is the spiritual solace given by knowing that somebody cares and can be compared with the solace of knowing that God cares.

For the younger members of the street, relating to the adults, it is knowing that these people have known you all your life. They know all your secrets just as God might know all your secrets. It means that the youngsters want to get away because it is embarrassing for people to know all their secrets, but at the same time it is a comfort. Chris says that it is the people who make it good. Some new people have moved into the street and haven't joined in, but most people do. He thinks that perhaps it's either because a lot of us are navy people and tend to get on well with each other, or that it's the sea. It has a calming effect and perhaps it makes us all feel calm. When he's fed up he walks by the sea and it gives him a sense of perspective. Perhaps it's the movement of the waves or just the sea's immensity. He remembers sitting on the back of a carrier in the Atlantic just watching the waves – happiness.

David believes that the shape of the street is important, in particular the lack of a wide turning circle at the end, which pushes the houses closer together and makes us relate to each other. Very few of us have net curtains in the windows, another gesture about the importance that relationship has over privacy. We have very small front gardens, which also expose us to our neighbour's view and insist that we relate to them. He also thinks that the young children draw the inhabitants together. As people grow older and the children no longer play in the street, people aren't drawn together so much and the character of the street is changing. Maybe this will be cyclical. As the older people leave or die perhaps younger people with children will take their places, and the street will revert to being a place where young children play.



Inevitably, some of the relationships are sometimes conflictual, although the conflict tends to be very low key and resolved quietly. The misbehaviour and noisiness of some of the teenagers have been issues at various times, but are usually resolved by a visit to the parents of the offending child. People sometimes get cross about car-parking in the street, usually by new inhabitants of the flats in number 6. Bernice and Brian's house has its front in one cul-de-sac and the back garden opens into our street. They think that the difference between the two streets is very pronounced. Our street has smaller houses with narrow front gardens, houses that are mainly semi-detached. The other has larger houses with wide front gardens, with high hedges and driveways for their cars. People tend to drive in and get out of their cars, with no need to see or communicate with their neighbours. In our street that is impossible: most people have to park in the road, and see and talk to their neighbours while they are unloading the shopping or going into or coming out of their houses after or before work. This gives time and opportunity for the ritualistic communications that I identified above.

Because this communication is established, people feel that they can ask each other for help, even for such small things as taking in a parcel or letting in the workmen, and this feeling of being needed consolidates the community ethos. So the street wouldn't work if it was a through street with fast traffic, if the houses were set further back, if the street were wider, if we had larger front gardens with high fences, if we had net curtains. The lack of high fences and net curtains indicates a degree of trust and dependence on our neighbours and this is delicately sustained by the rituals of relationship. If we were suddenly to erect a high fence we would be indicating to our neighbours that we no longer wanted to be a part of the community in the same way, and that we no longer trusted them with the information about our daily lives. This is exactly the message that was presumed to have been given when the new people in Charley and Betty's house erected their fence. None of this is ever articulated openly in the everyday communications of the street, but is instead taken for granted.

The trust and openness demonstrated in the street is repeated in most people's houses, where, in particular, young people find themselves welcome. My children Sam and Katy have always brought home large numbers of their friends and Polly is beginning to do the same.



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Conclusions and the future

While I have been writing this, I have been reading Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford*,¹⁰ which is an account of hamlet, village and small town life at the turn of the last century. At that time there were major changes happening as traditional self-sufficient country life gave way to suburban life. Perhaps at the turn of this century we are on the brink of another major change as technology alters the way we work and the ways our communities function. Flora's communities revolved around agricultural work and its supporting crafts, while our street community has at its base the notion of a 9 to 5 job away from the home, and a mother staying at home for at least a few years to bring up her children. We have seen the street change as the children grow up and stop playing in the street to the same extent, and the mothers mostly go back to work and stop being available for mid-morning coffee and gossip. It will be interesting to see if technology, allowing working from home, revives small town life. If this is the case, the town planners of the future should note carefully the difference the structure of a street makes to the functioning of the community, and plan accordingly. Because, if organized religion continues to decline, and the nuclear family to fragment, street community life or street spirituality may be all that people have to sustain them spiritually, or to put it more prosaically, to sustain the ordinary virtues on which community life depends.

The new British National Curriculum for Citizenship, referred to in the quote that began this chapter, talks about the importance of citizenship education for children so that participation in local community life can be a prerequisite to wider participation in national civic life. It also states that such education will promote their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. I would like to suggest that an appreciation of the spiritual and moral ethos that might well already exist in the children's own local communities might be a valuable starting point for citizenship education.

Notes

1. National Curriculum Council (2000), *Citizenship 2000* (London: NCC), p. 12.



2. T. Todorov (1999), *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps* (London: Phoenix).
3. See J. F. Lyotard (1984), *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).
4. Mikhail Bakhtin, in the book of his work published in 1981, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Texas University Press), describes the difference between the genre of the epic and the genre of the novel. The epic is seen as 'closed', 'complete' and 'congealed' (p. 14) while the novel is 'determined by experience, knowledge and practice' (p. 15), and Bakhtin claims that when other literary genres are 'novelized', that is, influenced by the novel as genre, 'they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self parody, and finally – this is the most important thing – the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)' (p. 7). To me this also suggests a lack of academic distance and is not a comfortable position for me in my writing; so I have novelized my academic work.
5. See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
6. J. F. Lyotard (1983), *Le Differend* (Paris: Minuit), p. 228.
7. C. Erricker (2000), 'Editorial', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* (5.1).
8. See S. Hekman (1995), *Moral Voices, Moral Selves* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 109ff. for a discussion of the discursive self, constructed in conversation with others; and C. Erricker and J. Erricker (2000, in press), *Reconstructing Religious, Spiritual and Moral Education* (London: Routledge), for a discussion of the dialogic self, similarly constructed.
9. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 22.
10. F. Thompson (1948), *Lark Rise to Candleford* (London: The Reprint Society).



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